# The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*


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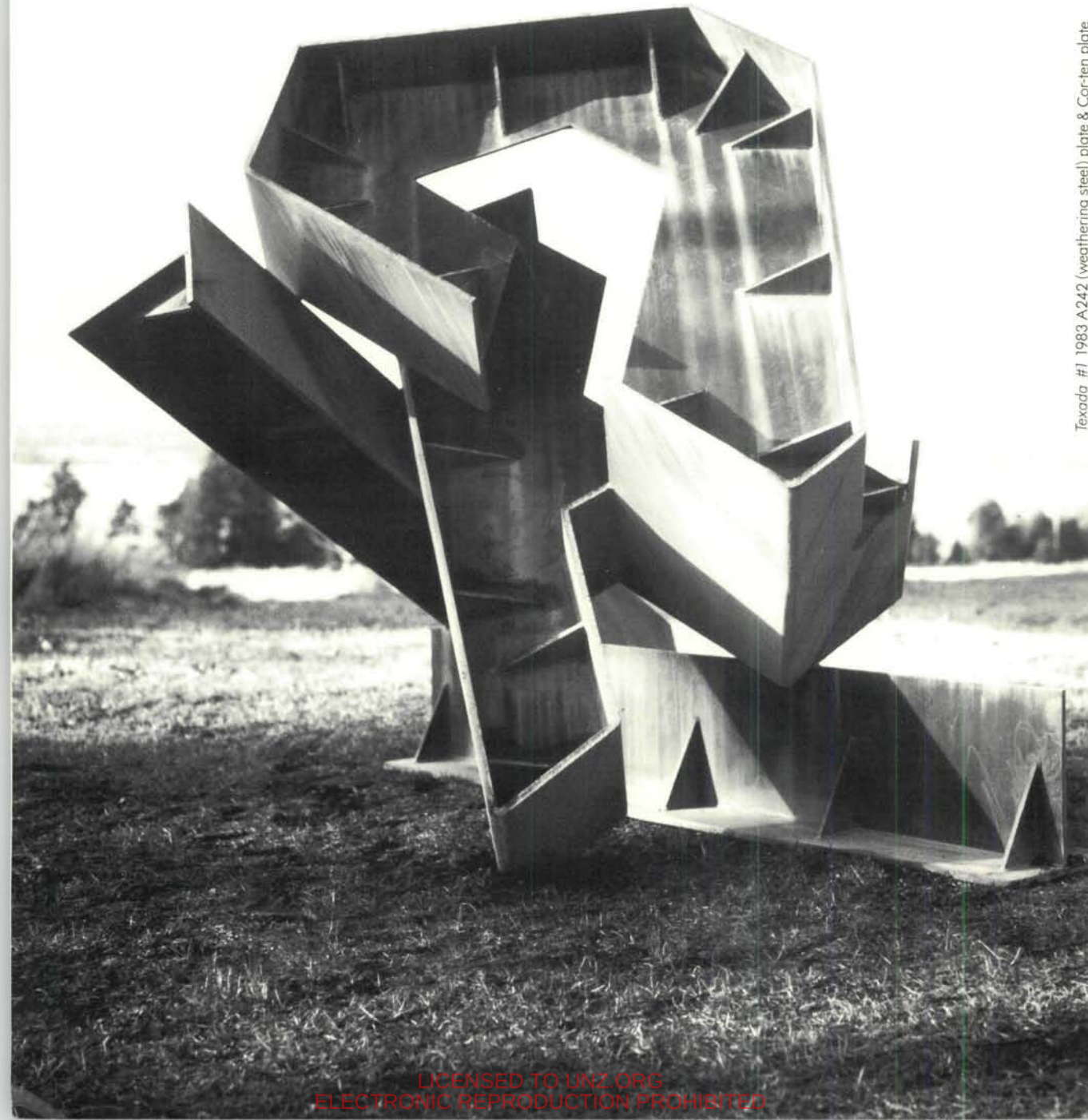

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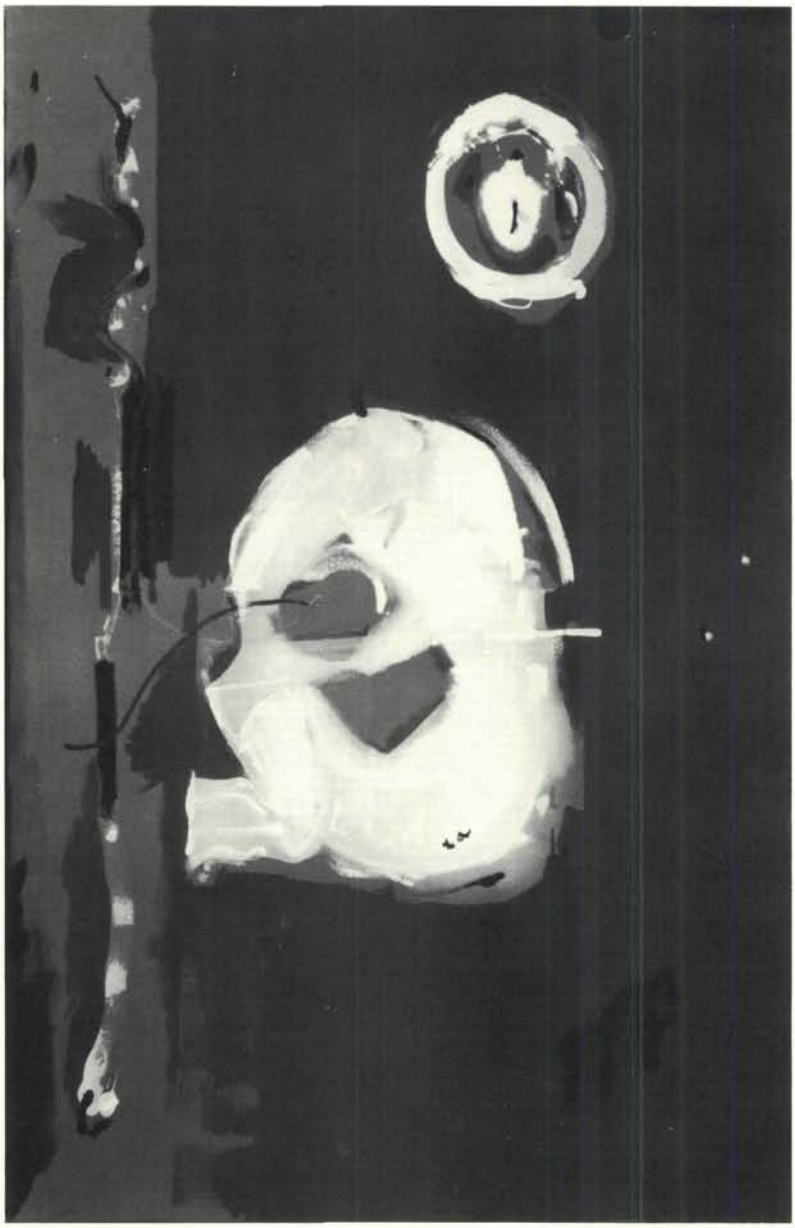

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# The two Henry Moores

## *by Hilton Kramer*

With the death of Henry Moore on August 31, our last living link with the world of Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, of Ezra Pound and Roger Fry—the world of the London avant-garde in the years just before and after the First World War—has passed from the scene. Moore often spoke of what it had meant to him to have stumbled upon Fry's *Vision and Design,* with its great essays on "Negro Sculpture" and "Ancient American Art," while he was still a student at the Leeds School of Art. The year was 1920. "That," said Moore in an interview in 1961, "was really the beginning." He added that "another book that I found a great help and an excitement was Ezra Pound's book on Gaudier-Brzeska." These led, on the one hand, to an exploration of the British Museum, with its stunning collections of Egyptian, Etruscan, Mexican, and African sculpture, and on the other, to the discovery of Brancusi and the Cubists. At a time when, except for Epstein, British sculpture was sunk in an academic doldrums, these were fresh and liberating influences, and it was to them that Moore owed much of the impetus that, by the 1930s, made him the leading modernist artist of his generation in England.

It was not, however, as a representative of the avant-garde that Moore came to be known to the present generation. He was eighty-eight at the time of his death, and for decades he had been a much-honored figure—some thought, indeed, a too-much-honored figure. He was the favorite of official committees the world over when it came to commissioning an "important" public sculpture. As a result of these public commissions, which made Moore's work a familiar presence in a great many cities of Europe and America, he came to be admired by many people for whom his work embodied what they most responded to in modern art—a benign but nonetheless authentic and accessible lyricism that did not threaten to turn their world upside down or make importunate demands on their reason or their civility.

For his ability to please this "lay" public Moore was never forgiven, of course. In the days before commissions for modern sculpture in public spaces became the commonplace they now are, Moore's popularity was taken to represent a kind of betrayal. It so obviously signified a rejection of both the hermetic and the radical strains of the modern movement. And when the time came for many others to be given similar commissions, when the erection of a modern sculpture in a public space became all but mandatory, Moore continued to be resented. He was now seen to represent the old guard—a "safe" choice for bureaucrats and curators wishing to avoid the risky and the unknown. The question of whether, in the realm of public sculpture, the risky and the unknown were always to be preferred was rarely raised. It was simply assumed that they were, and Moore was held in contempt for failing to provide either.



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The criticism directed against Moore's public sculpture was not unfounded, however. I certainly contributed my share to this criticism, and there was a reason for it. The first of Moore's big public pieces, the marble *Reclining Figure* he created for the plaza of the UNESCO building in Paris in 1957-58, was disheartening even to many of his admirers. Donald Hall put the matter most politely in the book he wrote about Moore twenty years ago. This sculpture, Hall wrote, was "a composite Henry Moore, almost an *average* Henry Moore reclining figure . . . . a breakthrough in nothing but size." The UNESCO figure was the first of Moore's failed monuments—an overscale studio piece that steadfastly refused to come to life in the open air. Eventually, though, Moore found a way to make these outdoor pieces work—in part, perhaps, by accepting bronze as his primary medium for these sculptures and thus abandoning the pretense that, in this aspect of his work, he was still a carver.

If he could not be said to have "solved" the problem of public sculpture in our time, and if he produced too much that merely repeated what he had already done in this vein—well, among the many contemporary artists who have undertaken such commissions in recent years, Moore was scarcely unique in either regard. And considering some of the horrors, as well as some of the trivialities, which have lately been perpetrated in the name of public sculpture, Moore can safely be said to have acquitted himself with honor, if not always with great distinction, in this difficult task.

There can be no question, however, about when it was that Moore produced his greatest work. It was in his carvings of the Thirties that he created the oeuvre likely to guarantee his reputation for posterity. In those stone and wood carvings, which culminated in the superb elmwood *Reclining Figure* (1939), now in the collection of the Detroit Institute, Moore succeeded in creating an idiom that was entirely his own. It contained elements of the primitive and archaic art he had first read about in *Vision and Design*, but these were now assimilated into a vision that significantly diverged from anything Roger Fry could have approved of. For the influence of Surrealism was also strongly felt in these carvings, and this gave to Moore's work in the Thirties that touch of the irrational and the erotic which served as a powerful counterforce to the purely formal, abstract impulse that otherwise dominated it.

Moore was never, of course, an authentic Surrealist. His outlook was far too commonsensical for some of the more arcane tenets of Surrealist doctrine to make much of an impression on him, and the more violent emotions fostered by Surrealist ideology were entirely alien to his natural taste. Yet he was nonetheless drawn to the Surrealist imagination, with its emphasis on the poetry of the unconscious, and it is to that influence that we can trace some of his most inspired work in this period.

It was in many of the small carvings of the Thirties that Moore also came closest to being a pure abstractionist. But was he ever really an abstract sculptor? I think not. The figure, either directly depicted or obliquely suggested, remained his abiding interest. He might keep his distance from it at times, but not for long and never permanently. All the same, he was clearly and decisively influenced by abstraction, and not a little fearful of it. As often happens in art, this fear served as a stimulus. What gave Moore's work of the Thirties its special emotional charge, I think, was precisely the tension which resulted from the artist's divided and unresolved feelings about both abstraction *and* Surrealism, which were then locked in a doctrinaire conflict with each other. Both exerted an immense and fecund pressure on Moore's imagination at this time, but their appeal also met with a certain resistance. He drew upon their ideas, but he was unwilling to surrender completely to the absolutism of either camp. To be at the crossroads of abstraction and Surrealism at that historical moment, to be at once an insider and an outsider in relation to both these movements, proved to be a huge creative advan-



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tage for Moore. It gave him an aesthetic independence which their more orthodox followers tended to lack, and it provided Moore with the kind of intellectual stimulation which he had got from reading Roger Fry and Ezra Pound in his earlier days and which, for reasons one can only speculate about, he seems never to have found again.

It was the war, of course, which brought this period of high achievement to an abrupt halt. On this side of the Atlantic we tend to forget what the effect of the Second World War was on the life of art in England. In Paris, even under the ordeal of the Nazi occupation, Picasso was apparently free to pursue his artistic interests virtually without interruption. In New York, the influx of refugee artists from Europe played, as we know, a catalyzing role in the formation of the New York School. Nothing like that was possible for artists in London in the days of the Blitz. With few exceptions, the life of art simply stopped, and was not resumed until the war was over.

Moore produced almost no sculpture during the war. His exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in 1940 thus marked the close of an important period in his development. When he returned to sculpture after the war, his outlook had changed. His major work of the war years had consisted of the Shelter Drawings he produced as an Official War Artist. During the Blitz, the subterranean passageways and platforms of the London Underground were used as air-raid shelters. Night after night large numbers of people were obliged to take refuge in these shelters, and the haunting, macabre drawings in which Moore depicted these huddled masses remain one of the most extraordinary memorials of the war. I hope that some day we shall be given a comprehensive exhibition of the Shelter Drawings—it would seem to be an appropriate subject for the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven—for they are not only of great interest in themselves but are crucial to an understanding of the sort of artist Moore became after the war.

Which is to say that from the Forties onward he always remained, in a sense, an "official" artist. His attachment to the avant-garde had been severed by the war, and his artistic development was thenceforth more determined by the nature of his public role than by the kind of inner necessity that had governed his work in the Thirties. I find nothing dishonorable in this development. It was, in any case, part of the historical shift which occurred in the postwar era when, for the first time, the art of the modern movement ceased to be an isolated aesthetic phenomenon, of interest mainly to artistic coteries and their small circle of supporters, and began to be absorbed into the mainstream of Western culture. It is no derogation of Moore to say that he was one of the principal beneficiaries of this fateful shift. The question that remains to be answered is: Was he also one of its artistic casualties?

That he was not, at the outset at least, completely prepared for this new role is clear enough from the debacle of the UNESCO commission. But then it must be asked: What modern artist *was* prepared for this role? As it happened, Moore was given a greater number of opportunities to test his skill at the difficult task of public sculpture than any of his contemporaries, and this inevitably meant more opportunities to fail. What is remarkable, however, is not the failure but the frequency with which something engaging and even poetic survives it, something that lodges in the mind as an agreeable memory. The sculpture that Moore created for the plaza at Lincoln Center in New York, for example, is not in my opinion a great work of art. Yet its massive forms lend a certain grace to what is otherwise an utterly characterless public space. I am not really sure that we can expect much more than that from any public sculpture at the present time, and we have often been given a lot less.

Still, there is something to be regretted in this whole later phase of Moore's career. I was never convinced that the role of official artist really suited him. There was much in it that remained at odds with his sensibility. Visiting him at his home in Much Haddam



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and seeing his sculptures arrayed in the open fields which surrounded his house and studios, one felt that it was only in this pastoral setting that his later work achieved its full power. In that gentle landscape his figures enjoyed a repose that was forever denied them in those cosmopolitan environments where the world at large generally encountered them. That landscape and the emotions it generated had long been an essential part of Moore's imagination, and his sculpture looked somehow orphaned when separated from it. Seeing Moore's sculpture in busy urban settings, one misses the green meadows and soft, misty light that are the natural habitat for the kind of massive, organic forms he favored. Something of their poetry is lost in a space that is alien to their spirit. The contrast of light and shadow tends to be harsher, the bronze surfaces too bright or too dark. The eye seeks a horizon that isn't there. In all of Moore's big reclining figures there is a kind of riming with a lyrical landscape, and the rime is shattered, of course, in a setting that negates its possibility.

There were, in a sense, two Henry Moores. The artist who emerged in the Twenties and created his most original work in the Thirties was one; the official artist of the postwar years was the other. What separates the one from the other isn't only the difference between youth and age, though that is part of the story; and it isn't only the difference between the avant-garde and the establishment (which for Moore's generation was still an important distinction), though that too is part of the story. In Moore's career we are given a glimpse of what happened to art itself in the postwar world when a wholly new cultural situation made it possible for so many veterans of the old avant-garde to become our "official" artists. That is a story that has yet to be told, and in it Henry Moore will occupy an important place.



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# "But today the struggle": Spain and the intellectuals

## *by Ronald Radosh*

Coming to terms with the truth about the Spanish Civil War seems more than ever to pose insurmountable difficulties for those intellectuals—perhaps the majority—who were brought up to believe that Spain in the Thirties was the one great cause in that "low dishonest decade," as Auden called it, which need never be either reconsidered or repented. Yet the publication of two new anthologies on the fiftieth anniversary of the war—Valentine Cunningham's *Spanish Front* and John Miller's *Voices Against Tyranny*—together with the discussion they have generated come as a sober reminder that this is a subject that remains part of the unfinished business of recent intellectual history.[1] "No episode in the 1930s," Paul Johnson has aptly observed, "has been more lied about than this one, and only in recent years have historians begun to dig it out from the mountain of mendacity beneath which it was buried for a generation."[2] Judging from some recent commentaries on Spain in the Thirties, there are still many intellectuals who would prefer—even today—to let the terrible truth remain buried rather than have their fantasies of a noble past destroyed.

For most Left intellectuals, in fact, Spain in the Thirties is a cause to be reaffirmed rather than investigated. Reviewing *Spanish Front* and *Voices Against Tyranny* in *The New York Times,* for example, Herbert Mitgang wrote that for all the doubts caused by the actions of Soviet commissars in Spain, George Orwell and other intellectuals "never regretted that they had gone to Spain" in support of the Republican side.[3] In the same vein, Christopher Hitchens, writing about Spain in *Grand Street,* asserts that there is "something creepy about the 'compulsion' to chuck Old Left causes [like the Spanish Civil War] over the side."[4] Despite all that Hitchens claims to understand about the betrayal of the Spanish Republic by the Soviets and the Communists, he cites Orwell to support his conclusion that Spain in the Thirties "was a state of affairs worth fighting for." And writing in *The New Republic,* the distinguished literary critic Alfred Kazin offers the same quotation from Orwell—who was talking about the libertarian-anarchist revolution of 1936—and comments that "truth would always be Orwell's ace in the hole." To Kazin, the "truth" is that the Civil War is simply "the wound that will not

1 *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War,* edited by Valentine Cunningham, Oxford University Press, 388 pages, $7.95; and *Voices Against Tyranny: Writing of the Spanish Civil War,* edited by John Miller, Charles Scribner's Sons, 227 pages, $7.95.

2 Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties.* Harper & Row, 1983, pages 321-340. Other citations from Paul Johnson are from these pages.

3 Herbert Mitgang, *The New York Times,* August 18, 1986, page C18.

4 Christopher Hitchens, "Re-Bunking," *Grand Street,* Summer 1986, pages 228-231.



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heal"; hence, the "destroyers of the Spanish Republic would always be my enemies."[5]

To those like Kazin who still consider Spain "their" war, it was the one pure cause of the 1930s. "It was the passion of that small segment of my generation," Murray Kempton has written, "which felt a personal commitment to the revolution."[6] The cause was easily definable—support of a legally elected democratic government battling reactionary generals who fought to install a Spanish version of fascism. The democratic Republic stood alone: the Western democracies stayed neutral and refused to sell it arms, while the regimes in Germany and Italy rushed men, airplanes, and weapons to aid General Franco's rebellion. Defense of the Republic became a symbol for all that was good and decent, as the "progressive" world organized against the tides of reaction and Nazism.

The truth, of course, is not so simple. The Civil War took place because indecisive elections in February 1936 revealed a nation divided in half; the irresponsible militancy of sectors of the more extreme Left fed the aims of the insurgent generals. Once civil war broke out, both sides were responsible for unspeakable and equally repugnant atrocities. The foreign intervention of Germany prevented Franco's defeat, just as Soviet military aid allowed the Republic the means to beat back the initial advance of Franco's forces.

The problem was that the Soviet Union exacted a harsh price from the Spanish Republic for receipt of that military aid. Stalin's involvement came rather late in the war, by way of a policy of cautious military intervention. Soviet tanks, planes, and artillery did not reach Spain until October and November of 1936, and they were of a limited caliber—no match for the heavy equipment supplied by the Germans and Italians. Even so, Stalin insisted upon payment in advance; he took the valued gold reserves of the Republic out of Spain and into Russia. Fearing involvement in a war with Germany and Italy, Stalin limited his aid to bolstering the resistance of the anti-Franco forces in the hope that Britain and France might be induced to abandon their policy of non-intervention.

Stalin's cynical goal was to steer internal developments in Spain to coincide with the foreign policy objectives of the Soviet Union. He wanted to prolong the existence of the Republic until the Western democracies joined him in supporting the Republicans. It was a strategy of stalemate: Stalin purposely never gave the Republic enough arms with which to win. At the same time, he secretly began to negotiate with Nazi Germany, hedging his bet lest the first course fail to produce results.

The price paid by the Republic for the much-heralded Soviet aid was the factor that led to the ultimate betrayal. In exchange for military aid, Stalin demanded the transformation of the once free Republic into a prototype of what became the People's Democracies in the postwar world. The findings of historians have helped us to understand just how total Soviet control of the Spanish Republic had become. Indeed, the most recent contributions starkly confirm the validity of the revelations of General Walter Krivitsky, the very first defector from the NKVD (the forerunner of the KGB). At the time—in 1938—much of the left-wing world treated Krivitsky's confession as anti-Bolshevik paranoia—most especially his revelation that Stalin was already dealing with the Nazis, but also his detailed accounts of the torture and police-state methods brought to Spain by the Soviets as part of their program of "assistance." We know now that Krivitsky was telling the truth.

When Hugh Thomas published the first edition of his now classic work, *The Spanish Civil War,* in 1961, he warned readers that "Krivitsky's evidence must be regarded as tainted unless corroborated." By 1966, when he brought out the second edition of his history, Thomas had revised that early

5 Alfred Kazin, "The Wound That Will Not Heal," *The New Republic,* August 25, 1986, pages 39-41.

6 Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time.* Dell, 1955, page 317.



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judgment, and wrote that "Krivitsky's evidence can generally be accepted."[7] But it was left to Burnett Bolloten, author of the majestic historical study—forty years in the making—*The Spanish Revolution* (1979), to give Krivitsky's work a close reading, and to conclude not only that this NKVD general was telling the truth but that "Krivitsky's revelations have proved to be amazingly accurate, including many of the smallest details, and they constitute a major contribution to our knowledge of Soviet foreign policy aims and Soviet intervention in the Spanish civil war."[8] Regarding torture, Krivitsky had written that what the Russians brought to the Republic was unmitigated repression and terror—a civil war against the Spanish Left. The regular police corps was reorganized. Communists secured the pivotal positions in the newly rebuilt police, which became a formal part of the Soviet apparatus in Spain. The NKVD, Krivitsky wrote in his memoirs, "had its own special prisons. Its units carried out assassinations and kidnappings, filled hidden dungeons and made flying raids. It functioned . . . independently of the Loyalist government . . . . The Soviet Union seemed to have a grip on Loyalist Spain, as if it were already a Soviet possession."[9]

At the time, of course, these comments were treated as smears by an untrustworthy renegade who was said to be in league with the Nazis. Just how accurate Krivitsky actually was, however, can best be appreciated by looking at the conclusions reached by the dean of left-wing British historians, E. H. Carr. Carr was as sympathetic to the Soviet Union as any historian could be, yet he declared in his posthumously published book, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War,* that by 1937 the Russians had brought to Spain an institution known as SIM, "a new body whose professed function was counter espionage," and that it "quickly spread its tentacles to all parts of Republican Spain, occupying itself with repression and torture." Spain, Carr wrote, had become "what its enemies called it, the puppet of Moscow."[10]

Another British historian, Antony Beevor, writes in his book *The Spanish Civil War* that the torture introduced was of a new and quantitatively different caliber.[11] It went beyond "beatings with rubber piping, hot and cold water treatment, splinters inserted under nails and mock executions." Under Soviet direction, Beevor tells us, "cell floors were specially constructed with the sharp corners of bricks pointing upward so that the naked prisoners were in constant pain. Strange metallic sounds, colours, lights and sloping floors were used as disorientation and sensory-deprivation techniques."[12]

The evidence is unmistakable that, by 1937, the Spanish "Red" Republic had more in common with Franco's territories in Spain, or with the authoritarian regime after his victory, than it did with the libertarian revolt of 1936 that had been heralded by the much-quoted George Orwell. As Beevor so aptly writes, the Communists were in "many ways the counterpart of Franco . . . practitioners of statecraft [who] . . . exploited the war emergency to label any opposition . . . as treasonable to the cause." As one Anarchist militant put it: for the people of Spain, "whether Negrin won with his communist cohorts, or Franco won with his Italians and Germans, the results would be the same for us."[13]

What if the Republic, and not Franco, had won? In *The Spanish Revolution,* the historian

7 Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War.* Eyer and Spottiswood, 1961, page 263; revised edition, Penguin, 1965, page 337. A third edition was published by Harper & Row last month.

8 Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War.* University of North Carolina Press, 1979, page 110.

9 Walter G. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service.* Harper, 1939, pages 102-107, 291.

10 E. H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War.* Pantheon, 1984, page 44; page 31.

11 Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War.* Orbis Publishing, 1982, pages 211-212.

12 Beevor, page 281.

13 The anarchist militant is Abad de Santillan, quoted in Beevor, page 194.



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Stanley G. Payne judges that if one goes by left-wing policy during the Civil War, there is little reason to assume that a Communist-dominated Republic would have shown any tolerance for dissent or even led to a subsiding of brutal internal terror. Indeed, Payne writes, "there was nothing in Franco's zone to equal the almost constant interparty murder that went on under the People's Republic." This reality, Payne argues, accounted for much of the "final collapse of morale" within the Republican ranks.[14]

Even one former Spanish militant in the PCE (Spanish Communist Party), the future novelist and screenwriter Jorge Semprun (who was a leader of the Communist underground between 1959 and 1964), admits that, under Franco's authoritarian reign, Spain reached a higher level of material and social progress, along with industrial and military strength, than existed in any "socialist" regime under Soviet control. And, he adds, under Franco the working class in Spain had more freedom than their counterpart in any country "improperly called Socialist." In the Eastern European states, "it is not allowed to strike. It can organize itself only in labor unions that are mere transmission belts of the state apparatus and the single party, compared to which the vertical unions of the Franco dictatorship were genuine democratic paradises."[15] One can honestly agree with the judgment of Joaquín Maurín, once an intellectual activist with the Communist-syndicalist Worker Peasant Bloc, who wrote a full quarter of a century later, in 1966, that "from the moment in which the alternative was posed, beginning in June 1937, between the Communist party, at the orders of Moscow, or the opposing military regime, reactionary but Spanish, the conclusion of the Civil War was predetermined."[16]

Understanding some of this history is a prerequisite for evaluating the story of the Western intellectuals and their response to the Civil War. As we have seen, Alfred Kazin and others make much of Orwell's statement that though there was much he did not understand and did not even like about revolutionary Barcelona, "I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for." The quotation is accurate, but those who cite Orwell tend to omit the careful distinction he made between the original revolt and the very different reality after 1937. Orwell recognized this new reality full well, and he did not like what he saw. While he heralded Spain of August 1936 as a people's revolt, he had reached the sad conclusion that by January of 1937 "the Communists were using every possible method, fair and foul, to stamp out what was left of the revolution." He went on to cite, as one of his reviews reprinted in *Spanish Front* reminds us, "the ceaseless arrests, the censored newspapers and the prowling hordes of armed police," comparing the situation to a "nightmare."[17] Does anyone really think that this was the Spain that Orwell saw as worth defending and fighting for?

Spain, as Mr. Kazin has so eloquently reminded us, became the central metaphor for artists, intellectuals, and writers of the 1930s. Hemingway immortalized the conflict in *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* although the veterans of the International Brigades were angered by his critical portrayal of the fanatic French commissar, André Marty. Nicknamed "the butcher of Albacete" because of his murder of at least five hundred of his own men for desertion or Trotskyism, Marty is believed to have killed, by a minimum count, one-tenth of all the volunteers who died in Spain.

"Madrid is the heart," of a world, a civilization and an ideal, Auden opined in his poem "Spain" (1937). He spoke for a generation when he said one had to put aside "the

14 Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Revolution.* Norton, 1970, page 313.

15 Jorge Semprun, *The Autobiography of Federico Sanchez and the Communist Underground in Spain.* Karz, 1979, page 133.

16 Cited in Payne, page 374.

17 George Orwell, "Spanish Nightmare," from *Time & Tide,* July 31, 1937; reprinted in Cunningham, pages 316-317.



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walks by the lake . . . the bicycle races." There was only one task: "But to-day the struggle."[18] These two new anthologies devoted to writings about the Spanish Civil War remind us of just how much the attitude epitomized by Auden's poem (which he subsequently—to his honor—repudiated) was typical of the intellectual response at the time. They also serve to remind us, as Paul Johnson wrote, that "the intellectuals of the Left did not want to know the objective truth; they were unwilling for their illusions to be shattered. They were overwhelmed by the glamour and excitement of the cause and few had the gritty determination of Orwell to uphold absolute standards of morality."

In this respect, the role of Stephen Spender is particularly instructive. Spender has written the introduction to John Miller's anthology, *Voices Against Tyranny,* and he uses the opportunity to reflect on what Spain meant to the writers and artists of his generation. Spender now says that Auden, who had been criticized by Orwell for the poem on Spain, "came to agree with Orwell to the extent of feeling that his conscientious attempt to politicize his poetry in support of 'Spain' led him into very alien territory"; it opened him, Auden felt, to the grave charge of "using poetry to tell lies." Hence, because of the concluding lines of "Spain," Auden never allowed it to be reprinted during the remainder of his lifetime. The last lines of the poem had declared that

> History to the defeated
> May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.

Auden commented that "[T]his is a lie." As for himself, Spender now admits that "there were atrocities on the Republican side perhaps equalling those committed by the rebels." On the subject of atrocities, however, he never refers to Arthur Koestler's account, in *The Invisible Writing,* of the way Comintern propagandist Otto Katz manufactured phony fascist atrocities out of his office in Paris.[19] This is an important part of the story, for Stalinism was thus aided, as Paul Johnson writes, "not only by superb public relations but by the naïveté, gullibility and, it must also be said, the mendacity and corruption of Western intellectuals, especially their willingness to overlook what W. H. Auden called 'the necessary murder.'"

One might hope that, fifty years later, Western intellectuals would have more perspective on the events that once moved them into such tight corners. Yet, judging from Spender's introduction to *Voices Against Tyranny,* Spain still appears to be what Spender calls a simple "direct confrontation between good and evil, right and wrong, freedom and tyranny." In this view, there was only one bad side—that of Franco. Spender does observe that Auden and he too curbed their true shock over things like the destruction of the churches. Looking back, he reflects, there was an authentic Wordsworthian recognition of the joys of rebellion, but he bemoans the fact "that we could not see any of the terrible murders happening behind this scene of revolution." He now acknowledges "that there is no trust to be placed in travellers' impressions of popular rejoicing soon after revolution."

Spender, however, is still being disingenuous. His own career is a salutary reminder of how total identification with the "right" side corrupts intellectual integrity. One of the documents reprinted in Valentine Cunningham's *Spanish Front* is Spender's "I Join the Communist Party"—printed in the London *Daily Worker* in 1937—in which Spender apologized for first doubting that the Moscow trials were anything but honest, and explained that he now understood the nature "of the gigantic plot against the Soviet Government." This early heresy, Spender told his new comrades, occurred because he was then only "a liberal approaching com-

18 W. H. Auden, "Spain," from *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939,* reprinted in Miller, page 211.

19 Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing.* Macmillan, 1954, page 327.



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munism." Now that Spender understood that Stalin was right, he was ready to join the Party, evidently a necessity if one desired to go to Valencia to engage in anti-Fascist propaganda.[20]

Having joined the Party, Spender became an ardent spokesman for it. In that capacity, he took part in the International Writers' Congress held in Madrid in 1937. This was the prototype of those events that were later to occur with regularity in Havana during the 1960s and Nicaragua in the 1980s—events in which Western intellectuals reaffirm their closeness to the revolutionary struggle by partying in its midst. In Spain, Spender recorded, he and other delegates were "treated like princes or ministers . . . riding in Rolls Royces, banqueted, fêted, sung and danced to," all while the battle raged around them. The same Writers' Congress was noted for its conclusion, which consisted of a massive attack on André Gide, who was excoriated as a "fascist monster" for the book he had recently published criticizing the USSR.[21]

Spender's 1937 account tells how they were "woken up at 4 a.m. by the air-raid alarms," as the reality of the war intruded upon the Congress. Evidently, it did not intrude too much for Spender to proclaim that the Spanish writer José Bergamín was the right man to rebuke Gide, because Bergamín had a "mind which sees not merely the truth of isolated facts which Gide observed in the USSR, but the far more important truth of the effect which Gide's book is going to have."

If Spender bought the classic rationale of the Stalinized intellectual, it was this affair that caused another participant in the Congress, the Dutch Communist Jef Last, to suffer a severe disillusionment. Proud that the Congress condemned the murder of writers by Franco and other Fascists, Last asked, "why this conspiracy of silence around the cultural reaction in Russia . . . ?" Last could not accept the argument, presented to him by Egon Erwin Kisch, that when you hear of a Fascist bombing of a school you have "to defend everything that has been done on our side, *even the trials!*" Acting alone, Last protested against the Soviet delegates' demands that Gide be attacked by the Congress. Indeed, he pointed out, few in attendance had even read the book they were being asked to condemn. Gide had not been translated into Spanish and his book was not available anywhere in Spain.[22]

Spender then stood with the regular Communists. Later, of course, he broke with them, and today he writes that there is a "'truth' of 'Spain' that remained independent of, and survived the mold of, Communism into which successive Republican governments were forced." Even anti-Communists who supported the Republic, Spender writes, "nevertheless retained their belief in the justice of the Republican cause."

But when Spender was in Spain—at the very time he was attending the 1937 Congress and spoke in Britain on behalf of aid for the International Brigades—he privately held to a different "truth." It is to the credit of Valentine Cunningham that he includes the remarkable letter which Spender wrote to Virginia Woolf on April 2, 1937, in which the poet reflects that "politicians are detestable anywhere," and that Spain has shown him "the lies and unscrupulousness of some of the people who are recruiting at home" for the International Brigades, including those "of the *Daily Worker*." He had not seen the poet Julian Bell, her nephew, Spender wrote to Woolf, and he assumed that "he has not joined the Brigade." While Spender himself spoke in England in favor of the volunteers, he told Woolf that he

20 Stephen Spender, "I Join the Communist Party," London *Daily Worker*, February 19, 1937, in Cunningham, pages 7-9.

21 Stephen Spender, "Spain Invites the World's Writers," from *Notes on the International Congress, Summer 1937* from *New Writing*, Autumn 1937, in Cunningham, pages 85-91. Gide's book, *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, was published in 1936.

22 Jef Last, from *The Spanish Tragedy*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1939; in Cunningham, pages 94-100.



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hoped Bell "will not do so," since participating in the Brigades called for "terrific narrowness and a religious dogmatism about the Communist Party line," as well as "toughness, cynicism and insensibility."[23]

Since Spender never said anything similar in public—and does not say anything like this in print even today—his letter is riveting. "The sensitive, the weak, the romantic, the enthusiastic, the truthful live in Hell," he wrote to Woolf, "and cannot get away." The Hell he spoke of was not that of Franco. "The political commissars . . . bully so much that even people who were quite enthusiastic Party Members have been driven into hating the whole thing." Spender told the story of one veteran he spoke with, who "complained to me bitterly about the inquisitional methods of the Party." Noting that it was a lie that the men were volunteers who could leave when they liked, Spender wrote Woolf that actually they were "trapped there," and wounds or mental collapse were not considered grounds for leaving, "unless one belongs to the Party élite and is sent home as a propagandist to show one's arm in a sling to audiences." Bitterly, Spender revealed that his closest friend fought in an offensive in which the men were sent to be slaughtered, with only olive groves for protection. After his friend's mental collapse, Spender tried to hire him as his personal secretary. The Party refused, and sent the man back to battle. He sought to escape, and was then put in a labor camp. Spender asked that nothing he had written be repeated, particularly "the more unpleasant truths about the Brigade."

Privately, Spender sought to help such men leave Spain, and he condemned the total fanaticism of the Party leaders who were really "unconcerned with Spain" and were intolerant of any dissent. But such truths had to be carefully guarded. Thus, Spender asked Woolf to quote his letter anonymously "to any pacifist or democrat who wants to fight." Privately, he hoped they would refrain from enlistment with the International Brigades. Publicly, Spender towed the line, and his published poems supported the cause. Of the martyred John Cornford, he said, in a review written in September of 1938, that he exemplified "the potentialities of a generation" that was fighting "for a form of society for which [it] was also willing to die."[24] When Spender wrote the letter to Virginia Woolf, was he secretly hoping that she would show it to Cornford before he made the fatal decision to join the battle, as Cornford wrote, "whether I like it or not"?

How are we to judge a writer who says one thing to a friend in private and quite the opposite to an innocent and credulous public on such a momentous issue? It is no wonder that Richard Gott was recently moved to observe that, the more we gain some historical perspective on Spain, "the more blurred becomes the morality."[25] It is worth remembering, however, that there *were* some writers who grasped the morality of the situation at the time, and showed an exemplary bravery and candor in acknowledging the villainy of their chosen side. The Catholic writer Georges Bernanos, once a supporter of the rightist and anti-Semitic Action Française, saw firsthand the horror of the atrocities perpetrated by the Franco forces and sanctified by the Catholic priests. In his searing account from *A Diary of My Times* (1938), which appears in the Cunningham anthology, Bernanos tells of "the organizing of Terrorism" by the Italian Black Shirts brought to Majorca by Franco.[26] Bernanos recoiled in horror at the figure of three thousand killed by right-wing death squads, as we would call them today, in a

23 Stephen Spender to Virginia Woolf, April 2, 1937, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tuden Foundations, in Cunningham, pages 307-309.

24 Review of *John Cornford: A Memoir*; *New Statesman & Nation*, November 12, 1938, in Cunningham, pages 328-330.

25 Richard Gott, "The Spanish Tragedy," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 27, 1986, page 22.

26 Georges Bernanos, *A Diary of My Times*. The Bodley Head, 1938; in Cunningham, pages 145-152.



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brief seven-month period. On that small island, he wrote, one could "witness the blowing-out of fifteen wrong-thinking brains per day." Hating "the sound and sight of it," Bernanos told the world the truth, despite the fact that it meant he was criticizing his own side. Bernanos saw that civil war meant "there is no longer any justice," and he pointed out that even moderate Republicans were shot "like dogs just the same," even though they had nothing to do with the Red Terror of Barcelona. To this Catholic intellectual, civil war meant terrorism had become "the order of the day."

On the Left, Simone Weil was Bernanos's counterpart. "[H]oping every day," she wrote in a letter to Bernanos, ". . . for the victory of one side and the defeat of the other," Weil went to Spain in August 1936.[27] After two months there, Weil no longer saw the war as one "of starving peasants against landed proprietors and a clergy in league" with them, but instead she viewed it as "a war between Russia, Germany and Italy." Almost witnessing an unjustified execution of a priest by Republican militants was enough to push Weil toward pacifism. Seeing the famed anarchist Durruti execute a young Falangist soldier, who had been conscripted against his will, never stopped weighing on her conscience. What Weil objected to was the relentless pleasure in murder that occurred on all sides. Killing "Fascists" and seeing them as beasts made the Republicans, in Weil's view, no better than the enemy; they too were excluding "a category of human beings from among those whose lives have worth." Such behavior, she wrote in her letter to Bernanos in 1938, soon obscured "the very purpose of the struggle." She had her sympathies with the anarchists and their cause, but Weil put her finger on what made the soldiers—as it made the Marxist guerrillas of the 1960s—a new elite. "An abyss separated the men with the weapons," Weil wrote, "from the unarmed population," an abyss Weil saw as similar to that which separated "the rich from the poor." Hence Weil felt that Bernanos, a monarchist, was closer to her than the proletarian comrades of the Aragon militia she had come to Spain to support.

If the Spanish War was a "People's War," as Valentine Cunningham claims, "the most potent and emotionally engaging focus of thirties democratic struggles and progressive working-class ambitions," it was also a writers' war, in which almost all writers felt the need to take sides. It is true that most writers of merit were on the Republican side. But can one say with a clear conscience that the forces of the Republic were fighting, as Cunningham suggests, for the survival of art and culture in free societies, when, had the Red side won, such a free society would have been just as much at risk as it was after the Franco victory?

Orwell had warned, in the concluding pages of *Homage to Catalonia*, that one should beware of partisanship, and of the distortion caused by his having seen only one corner of events. And he warned that readers should "beware of exactly the same things when you read any other book on this period." What happened, of course, was that writers went to Spain and, on the basis of brief tours, committed themselves and their art to the cause. Weil noted that it was "in fashion to go on a tour down there, to take in a spot of revolution, and to come back with articles bursting out of your pen." She noted such endeavors had to be superficial, especially since in the gale of civil war and revolution "principles get completely out of phase with realities," and the criterion for judging events disappears. How, she queried, could one "report something coherently on the strength of a short stay and some fragmentary observations?"

The problem continues into our own day. As Paul Hollander has lately reminded us, scores of modern-day political pilgrims continue the journeys to "socialist" countries and bring back their enthusiastic accounts of revolution, despite the realities

27 Simone Weil, "Lettre à Georges Bernanos," *Écrits Historiques et Politiques*. Editions Gallimard, 1960, in Cunningham, pages 253-257.



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that somehow evade their notice.[28] As even Cunningham acknowledges, Spain does not "sustain the earliest lyrical and romantic readings of the war as the zone where the necessary evils and terrors of revolution and war might after a temporary outing prove the gateway to happy conclusions."

We need to be especially alert to the accounts of the International Brigades in Spain, for on this subject particularly a great deal of emotion has been invested and a great many lies told. When, some years ago, Orwell condemned a memoir by the International Brigidista John Sommerfield as "sentimental tripe," he wrote that "we shall almost certainly get some good books from members of the International Brigade, but we shall have to wait for them until the war is over."[29] Such a book was in fact written, and it is far more powerful, honest, and moving than many of the didactic excerpts to be found in either of the new anthologies. William Herrick's novel *Hermanos!,* first published in 1969, is again available from Second Chance Press.[30] Herrick has given us what is perhaps the first honest portrayal of the war from within the Brigades in Spain, a searing, tough indictment, filled with the bitter reality of youthful bravery and idealism crushed by the agenda of the Comintern and its decision to allow so many thousands to die for nothing. Given that Herrick's novel is virtually the only critical account of the Civil War experience from the inside, an excerpt from it would have strengthened both of the new anthologies immeasurably. And another, younger novelist, David Evanier, continues the tradition with his forthcoming novel of the Old Left; a recently published excerpt pertaining to the International Brigades traces one veteran's destruction as part of his experience with the Soviet tank corps.[31]

Reading the committed partisans of the Left so many years later cannot but leave one with a bitter taste. How weak seem the partisans, and how prescient seem those who had doubts and expressed them. Indeed, one is struck by the intellectual courage it took to give anything but the expected answer, particularly when the question was framed, as it was in 1937 in a declaration "To the Writers and Poets of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales" by Auden, Spender, Neruda, and Aragon: "Are you for or against . . . the People of Republican Spain? . . . it is impossible any longer to take no side." Those who answered by insisting that no side be taken must be given high marks for intellectual fortitude, and for refusing to ride with the herd.

Aldous Huxley spoke a simple truth when he replied, to those who demanded he side with the Reds, that dictatorial Communism would produce "results with which history has made us only too sickeningly familiar." T. S. Eliot replied that, while he was sympathetic to the Republicans, "it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated." Condemned as a Fascist for these sentiments, Eliot at least was able to stay aloof from the foolish chorus of Stalinist hosannas in which the rest of the intellectuals joined. Was he not correct, then, to claim that, were the Left to win, it would "be the victory of the worst rather than of the best features . . . a travesty of the humanitarian ideals which have led so many people" to work for the Republic?[32] Eliot was wrong, I think, to have opposed lifting the embargo on arms. Despite the tragedy of

28 Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba.* Oxford University Press, 1981.

29 George Orwell, review of John Sommerfield's *Volunteer in Spain,* from *Time & Tide,* July 31, 1937, in Cunningham, page 19.

30 William Herrick, *Hermanos!* Second Chance Press, 1983.

31 David Evanier, "How Sammy Klarfeld Became a Vacillating Element in Spain," *The Journal of Contemporary Studies,* Summer/Fall 1985, pages 89-106.

32 Quotations from Aldous Huxley and T. S. Eliot are from *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War, 1937.* Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1937, in Cunningham, pages 51-57.



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the conflict—and the evils of Communism—the main threat to the world in the Thirties was that of the menace of aggressive Hitlerism. But Eliot was right, after all, on the moral issue involved, that democracy had little to do with supporting either "Berlin or Moscow."

Those who argued that the Fascists killed Lorca—and therefore all writers must stand with the Republic—would be hard pressed to refute the argument of Salvador Dali that Lorca's "death was exploited for propaganda purposes," and that personally the poet was "the most a-political person on earth."[33]

Undoubtedly, some did side with the Republic because of a valid opposition to Fascism, and because the Republic had the support of the populace. But who can question the accuracy of Vita Sackville-West, who addressed the hypocrisy of the call to support "the *legal* Government of Spain"? "Is this because it is the *legal* Government," she asked, "or because it is a Communist Government?"[34] (One is reminded of the pro-Sandinista writers today who ask that we not oppose the "legal" government of Nicaragua—something they did not hesitate to do when Somoza represented its legitimacy.) Noting that, if legality were the issue, these writers would have to support the existing regimes in Italy and Germany if rebellion broke out against them, Sackville-West identified the real issue: ". . . you want to see Communism established in Spain as well as in Russia, and you do not care a snap of the fingers whether a Government is 'legal' or not." Demanding frankness, Sackville-West challenged what she called the "subterranean forms of propaganda."

It was apparent that defenders of the Republic would use almost any argument to gather support. Virtually all honest observers knew about the brutal assassinations ordered by the Comintern for socialists, anarchists, and POUM revolutionaries after 1937. Yet Ernst Toller, whose propagandistic appeal to Americans started the campaign on behalf of Spain in the United States, emphasized the humanity of the Republic's troops toward its worst enemies. He had seen with his own eyes, Toller wrote, "the humane treatment of war prisoners, of Nazi pilots and Italian Fascist flyers who have killed dozens of children, dozens of women."[35] How false was the picture painted by Toller, of a free society in which Syndicalist, Communist, and parliamentary liberal were totally free and cooperated in word and deed for one aim—the destruction of the armed rebellion. It was Toller who orchestrated the false defense of Spain, and assured the worried liberals in the United States that "it is a lie that the fight is going on between Communism and Fascism." After all, he assured American liberals, Negrin had said that "private property is protected in Spain," and was simply trying to do "the same things that President Roosevelt strives to do: free the country from the power of economic Royalists." It was precisely these directives, forced upon Negrin by the Comintern, as Bolloten writes, that antagonized "other parties of the left and eventually" undermined the war effort "and the will to fight."[36] Having lost its reason and inspiration to fight, the Republic found itself with low morale among its would-be defenders and dependent upon the most treacherous of allies, Joseph Stalin and the Comintern apparatus.

How appropriate, then, that Cunningham ends his collection with "Crusade in Spain" by Jason Gurney,[37] who speaks the clear truth when he writes that "nobody, from either side, came out of it with clean hands." A member of the British section of the

33 Salvador Dali, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali.* Dasa Ediciones, 1942, in Miller, pages 203-210.

34 Vita Sackville-West's comment is also from *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War,* in Cunningham, page 229

35 Ernst Toller, "Transcript of Broadcast to the USA," *New Statesman & Nation,* October 8, 1938, in Cunningham, pages 72-75.

36 Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution,* page 173.

37 Jason Gurney, *Crusade in Spain.* Faber and Faber Ltd., 1974, in Cunningham, pages 379-380.



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International Brigades, Gurney noted that he and his comrades "had wilfully deluded ourselves into the belief that we were fighting a noble Crusade because we needed a crusade—the opportunity to fight against the manifest evils of Fascism . . . which seemed then as if it would overwhelm every value of Western civilization."

Gurney felt, writing in the mid-1970s, that "[W]e were wrong, we deceived ourselves and were deceived by others." But he argues as well that their fight was not in vain, and he does not regret his own part in that fight. "The situation," he says, "is not to be judged by what we now know of it, but only as it appeared in the context of the period." But much *was* known then, and suppressed by those who knew. Gurney would have it both ways. History has taught him the truth about Communism. But he still insists that because "others took advantage of our idealism in order to destroy it does not in any way invalidate the decision which we made." And this man who claims to understand history gives his last word to the blabbering of "La Pasionaria," Dolores Ibarruri. This famous Communist deputy, who sang the praises of the departing brigidistas as they were suffering the consequences of her betrayal, went immediately thereafter to Moscow, where she remained in exile until Franco's death. Those brave men who gave their lives had allowed themselves to be part of an ideological and propaganda instrument forged by the Comintern for its own purposes. Had they looked closer, they could have discerned the truth at the time. In 1986, those who still respond to the Spanish Civil War as simply "our cause" have no excuse.



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# Jorge Luis Borges, 1899-1986

## *by James Gardner*

The most urgent criterion we can apply to any writer is whether we will miss him once he's gone. For it is possible to admire a writer's work in a cool and critical way without ever feeling that we ourselves have been somehow diminished by his death, without ever feeling an almost selfish yearning to possess what he might have gone on to produce. The recent death of Jorge Luis Borges provokes this feeling; and there are not many other contemporary writers about whom this can be said. Even though the Fates were kind to Borges, granting him eighty-six years out of eternity, still it would have seemed a more fitting destiny had he survived to the Biblical longevity of his mother, who died not long ago at the age of ninety-nine, or had he equalled the heroine of one of his best stories, "La señora mayor," who passed away at one hundred. Although death was a recurring theme in his writings, and Borges even claimed to look forward to his appointed hour, one persists in feeling that those remote and snowy outposts of the human spirit that are attained in extreme old age would have been the perfect home for the noble fragility and profound introspection that were always the mark of the author.

Jorge Luis Borges was born in Buenos Aires in the summer of 1899, into a well-to-do and educated environment that would help to mold the cosmopolitan character of his future life and literature. His father, a lawyer and professor of psychology, had in him a rich admixture of Italian, Jewish, and English blood, while his mother, who was a translator of Melville and Virginia Woolf, was of native Argentine stock. For the first fifteen years of his life, Borges lived on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. In 1914, he moved with his family to Geneva, where he stayed for four years, gaining considerable proficiency in Latin, French, German, and English. After three years in Spain, where he found welcome among a group of avant-garde artists who called themselves the *ultraístas,* he returned with his family to Buenos Aires. For the next few years, Borges was active as a critic and poet in the capital. His principal prose works began to appear in the 1930s, starting with *Historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Infamy*). In 1937, he took a high position at a branch of the Buenos Aires municipal library, but he was dismissed with the arrival of Perón in 1946. He resigned from the civil service and made his living by lecturing on English literature until Perón was overthrown in 1955. Borges was then nominated to head the Buenos Aires Public Library, but by that time he had become almost completely blind, a fact which was to alter considerably his life and literature. For his remaining years, he devoted himself to writing and lecturing, as well as to travelling all over the world. He was married twice, and at the time of his death he had just moved to Geneva.

Despite his extensive travels and cosmopolitan education, which induced him to set



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his stories and poems in many different regions of the world, Borges throughout his life was very much attached to his native city, which figured frequently in his work, especially in his early years. He claimed that in his dreams and nightmares he found himself returning over and over again to specific points in its landscape. Though it was Borges who was destined to put his hometown on the international literary map, Buenos Aires was the center of a concentrated, fervid culture even in the period in which he was developing. As he wrote of it in one of his early poems:

> Las calles de Buenos Aires
> ya son la entraña de mi alma . . . .
> La ciudad está en mi como un poema
> que no he logrado detener en palabras.
>
> (The streets of Buenos Aires have become the center of my soul . . . . The city is inside me like a poem I haven't quite put into words.)

These lines are quoted in an essay on Borges by the critic Victoria Ocampo, for whose literary magazine *Sur* he and many of the leading Argentine writers of his day worked. When she founded a publishing house by the same name, Borges translated Kafka, Woolf, and Faulkner for her. He also collaborated on many projects with fellow Argentine writers, like Silvina Ocampo, Victoria's sister, and with Adolfo Bioy-Cesares. These collaborations constitute one half of Borges's entire output, and range from satirical assaults on imaginary artists and politicians to primers on Buddhism and Nordic and Anglo-Saxon literature. Although the Argentine writers of Borges's youth were conscious of their standing apart from the distant wellsprings of European culture, there is a general sense among them of trying to keep up with developments abroad, consciously cultivating a cosmopolitan environment through allusions to the most recent European writers and painters, and delighting to fill their pages with quotations in French, German, and English.

To many, Borges has come to represent just such a cosmopolitan breadth of interests and erudition. He was learned in many languages and cultures; he knew many cities and men. In one interview, reprinted in a volume called *Borges at Eighty* (published by Indiana University Press in 1982), he expressed regret that the language he got stuck with was Spanish. It was his contention that his temperament, in keeping with his ancestry, was more British than Iberian, and that the literature he loved best was the English he had imbibed from his earliest days rather than the Spanish literature that he really did not begin to study until he was in his twenties.

But in his many interviews, Borges never resisted the temptation to say something shocking in an offhand way, and in this case he was perhaps misstating the nature of his gifts. For though he had much in common with English mystical writers like De Quincey and Coleridge, he ultimately lacked their common sense. He was actually closer in spirit to the cabalistic temperaments of Spaniards like Raymond Llull, Calderón, and Quevedo. That is to say, there is something especially Hispanic about his achievement, and to understand this precise "Spanishness" would go far toward explaining the intricate workings of Borges's literary personality.

All national cultures are influenced by other national cultures. While weaker nations tend to produce pale imitations of those greater powers upon which they border, greater powers evolve their own organic style, usually by assimilating to themselves many foreign elements. Spain is perhaps unique in being a great power (at one time the greatest) whose artistic personality developed through the juxtaposition, rather than the confluence, of many diverse tendencies. In Spanish art and literature these tendencies exist as many autonomous parts, like tesserae in a mosaic.

Spain has always been the receiver of other cultures: from the Celts, who overran the Iberians in the fourth century, B.C., and the Romans, who two hundred years later overran the Celts; from the Germanic tribes



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who came in two waves in the fifth and sixth centuries; from the constant, menacing, and unassimilable presence of Islam for almost eight hundred years; from the Hapsburg presence in the sixteenth century and the Bourbon in the eighteenth. These influences, together with the early hospitality Spain showed to the Jews, have each left a different mark upon the Spanish people, as though a single block of fine marble were being worked upon by many gifted sculptors, none of whom had ever bothered to glance at what his neighbors were doing. In addition to this, Spain led the world in the colonization of the Americas, sending over far more men than the English did and interacting far more enthusiastically with the culture they found there. We do not find in Spain the give-and-take of other cultures, the assimilation or evolution. Rather, once a cultural influence is caught in the peninsula, it remains there in a state of permanent juxtaposition with such other cultures as it follows or precedes.

It is this kind of pluralism, then, this typically Spanish hodgepodge, that characterizes the poetry and prose of Jorge Luis Borges. More than any other writer of modern fiction, he does not merely embody his influences; he discusses them in the very process of their acting upon him. It is for this reason that in his short fictional pieces he is always happiest when he can pretend that he is writing an essay, carefully commingling imaginative authors with those real creatures—French, Irish, Icelandic, and Arabic—who have constituted the most direct influences upon his character.

Although Borges is always subtle in the extreme, and never overbearing, there is something in his writing which merits his being called a "strong poet." That is, he is able to see in everything a reflection of himself: everything, including earlier authors, is transformed into what he can use in the extension of his own character. His attitudes toward those earlier authors are evident in both his short fictional pieces and his literary essays, many of which are collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (*Other Inquisitions*).

One effect of this impulse to absorb other authors into his own literary personality was that, although Borges considered himself an Anglophile (which included his liking American writers), he was often unable to accept English prose and poetry on their own terms. For him, among the most important English-language writers were Sir Thomas Brown, Robert Burton, Coleridge, De Quincey, Poe, and Whitman. The first four are there because they appealed to Borges's mystical side. His admiration for Poe had more to do with his taste for nineteenth-century France than with anything American. Whitman, on the other hand, was a totemic figure to Borges, as he has been to many South American writers, who have made him into something far more exotic than we consider him to be here at home.

Thus, Borges's idiosyncratic tastes present a skewed version of the literature of our language. There are many great authors whom he simply does not know what to do with. He has little place in his understanding for Milton, for instance, or for Dryden and the Petrarchan sonneteers like Sydney and Spenser. And he has an exaggerated affection for other, minor writers, like Wilde, Blunden, and William Morris. All this is not to say that his tastes are without subtlety; there are simply some virtues to which he cannot respond and some vices which he is too willful to reprove.

In one telltale passage, Borges draws a parallel between Whitman and Valéry which, as usual, explains more about him than it does about them. He is quick to admit that ostensibly there is nothing in their poetic practice to connect the two men. Whitman was an ebullient populist, Valéry a dandified aesthete. But Borges finds them both preeminently important insofar as everything they wrote was studiously autobiographical, that is, a meticulous, self-dramatizing construction of themselves. In the same way, Borges possesses a startling personality that appears with thrilling clarity through over a half century of literary output. Like Valéry, he is a dandy and aesthete, though he has far less faith than Valéry had in the absolute



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value of words or in the ludic foundation of poetry. Like Whitman, he writes only when there is something that he wants to say. For him, poetry is therapeutic, and in his many poems he left memorable records of his emotional vicissitudes, which require us to take them more seriously than we would mere wordplay.

The exhilarating profusion of literary personalities which Borges uses to define himself probably has much to do with his distinct brand of privacy, in which he placed between himself and the external world an army of illustrious predecessors, defending himself against his immediate circumstances by taking refuge in the safety of things distant and things past. From the extreme south of the world, Argentina, he repeatedly showed an avid yearning to reach, at least in his mind, the farthest outposts of the north—the proverbial most northerly point, or *ultima thule,* that has figured for so long in the Southern imagination. He similarly went back to Anglo-Saxon times, acquiring an understanding of the earliest forms of our language. He delighted in all the strange and alien details of *Beowulf* and the *Song of the Rood,* and he even went so far as to learn Old Norse. He was eternally intrigued by the mysterious ceremony and indestructible otherness of imperial China, as well as by such offbeat places as the American Wild West and postwar Prague. But again, despite the attentiveness he showed to details of local color, and despite his great skill at literary pastiche, Borges was never able to accept these cultures on their own terms; they are invariably altered through the prism of his own predilections.

Borges was not at home in the modern world. He said repeatedly that he was not a modernist and that he would have preferred to have been born in the last century. Although there is something indisputably contemporary in his prose writings, as well as in his poetry, his fealty to the formal innovations of this century has long been in doubt. He rarely discussed twentieth-century poets, and men like Eliot and Pound seem to figure not at all in his thinking.

The artistic climate in which he grew up was that of *modernismo,* which was in a sense antithetical to what is meant by "modernism" in other Western languages. In Spanish, it represented the attempt on the part of Latin American writers—pre-eminently Rubén Darío, with the publication of a book of prose and poetry entitled *Azul* (1888)—to cultivate a more cosmopolitan and less provincial artistic taste, resplendent with all the peacocks, cloth-of-gold, and brocades of Symbolist painting and decadent poetry. In the present century this fashion was most assiduously cultivated by Leopoldo Lugones, whose sultry, orchidaceous style constituted a source of ongoing horror and delight for Borges.

If Borges was for most of his life an antimodernist, it is nevertheless true that in his early years—both in Spain, where he formed part of the *ultraístas,* and later in Argentina, where he founded, with several other young writers, a variety of short-lived avant-garde reviews—Borges was more attentive to the formal innovations of modernism than he would be in later years. The first two volumes of his poetry he never allowed to be published; his earliest published book was a collection entitled *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), in which he shares with his generation an affection for free verse. These poems usually alternate between the traditional eleven-syllable line of Spanish verse and lines of arbitrary length. Already in 1923 we can hear the soft-spoken clarity of voice and the tenacious sense of place that would characterize his poetry for sixty years to come:

> Habré de levantar la vasta vida
> que aún ahora es tu espejo:
> cada mañana habré de reconstruirla.
> Desde que te alejaste,
> cuántos lugares se han tornado vanos
> y sin sentido, iguales
> a luces en el día.
>
> (I shall have to leave this larger life, which is but a mirror of you. On every morrow I shall have to make it anew. Ever since I left you, how many places have become meaningless, like lights in the daytime.)



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In his next book of poems, *Luna de enfrente* (1925), a slightly jauntier tone sets in. It manifests itself in the overarching lines that take their inspiration from Whitman. Borges was not the first foreigner to be inspired by Whitman, of course—across the sea Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars had also learned from him—but with Borges and other South American writers (like Pablo Neruda) there was a sense of discovering in Whitman something essentially native to their culture. We of the United States tend to see the culture of Latin America as being different from our own. But for the writers of Chile and Argentina the crucial distinction is to be drawn between the two sides of the Atlantic—Europe and the Americas—not between north and south. Thus they can claim Whitman as their own, as is evident in such lines as these from Borges's "Mi vida entera" ("My Entire Life"):

> Aquí otra vez, los labios memorables, único
> y semejante a vosotros.
> He persistido en la aproximación de la dicha
> y en la intimidad de la pena.
> He atravesado el mar.
>
> (Here yet again, those memorable lips, unique and yet like your own. I have continued to know the approximation of happiness and the intimacy of pain. I have crossed the sea.)

At this time Borges was also influenced by the French Symbolists, and his affection for Whitman did not keep him from including in his second book a few poems in *versos de catorce*; that is, in verses composed of roughly fourteen-syllable lines, which bear the influence of the French alexandrine.

> El humo desdibuja gris las constelaciones
> Remotas. Lo inmediato pierde prehistoria
> y nombre.
> El mundo es unas cuantas tiernas imprecisiones.
> El río, el primer río. El hombre, el primer
> hombre.
>
> (Grey smoke reduces the remote constellation to a grey outline. The immediate loses its name and prehistory. The world becomes a few tender imprecisions. The river is the first river. The man, the first man.)

These tendencies, Whitmanesque and French Symbolist, were continued in his next book of poems, *Cuaderno San Martin* (1929), which was the last volume of poetry that he would publish for thirty-one years. When Borges finally emerged from this period of poetic silence, during which he produced his most memorable prose works, he was transformed, at least prosodically, into another person entirely. He now favored two extreme poetic forms: Baudelairean prose-poetry on the one hand, and the hendecasyllabic sonnet on the other. In one poem, entitled "Un poeta del siglo XIII" ("A Poet of the Thirteenth Century"), he even salutes the sonnet form:

> ¿Habrá sentido que no estaba solo
> Y que el arcano, el increíble Apolo
> Le había revelado un arquetipo,
>
> Un ávido cristal que apresaría
> Cuanto la noche cierra o abre el día:
> Dédalo, laberinto, enigma, Edipo?
>
> (Will he [the poet] have known that he was not alone, that the mysterious and unbelievable Apollo had revealed to him an archetype, a grasping chalice that would seize as much as night conceals or day discloses: Daedalus, the labyrinth, the enigma, and Oedipus?)

This poetry that Borges writes after 1960 is far more accessible stylistically. But he returns more often to literary and historical themes, dedicating sonnets to Poe and Emerson, as well as to such unusual poets as Jonathan Edwards, the theologian. One of the probable reasons for this turning away from visually compelling poetry in loose meters toward intellectual poems of the strictest formalism was the gradual blindness that overtook Borges in the late 1950s. It is plausible to suppose that the onset of this condition—which left him, so to speak, immured within himself—probably accen-



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tuated that deeply introspective part of his personality. For a man bereft of sight, it is usually easier to write poetry than prose, and easier to write formal poetry than the more relaxed sort, for it becomes more necessary than ever that the words be held and worked upon by the memory, and the memory is best served by a rigorous form. Borges explained his renewed interest in formalist poetry by saying that he simply found it easier to write that way.

Indeed, Borges's poetry was always more imaginative than inventive, and as he grew older he came to like the security of these tried and true forms, which he would fill with startling ideas, though at the same time he simplified his syntax to an easeful level that avoided the two extremes of artificiality and conversational flaccidity.[1]

The prose works of Borges do not reveal the same degree of formal variety, for he seems to have discovered early on the way in which he wanted to write. Borges was always a miniaturist. None of his works extends beyond roughly six thousand words. He never attempted a novel, although it is not inconceivable that he could have done so with considerable success. The general form of his prose work is found in his so-called *ficciones,* which are really precisely wrought essays on imaginary and nonexistent subjects. The form he chose to imitate was usually that of the scholarly article. It is worth wondering why he never thought to extend this to the length of an entire book, since the style is as much the style of books as of articles. Perhaps he realized that his stories were primarily the treatment of a single imaginative impulse; perhaps he felt (no doubt rightly) that their jewel-like concision could not fill out a larger form.

The principal strategy in Borges's fiction is the inclusion, side by side, of precise references to real people, places, and texts and precise references to imaginary people, places, and texts. Because the imaginative and actual tend to revolve around the arcana of numerology and cabalistic mysticism in his stories, there is a constant sense of the subject passing in and out of focus—until one despairs of ever sorting out reality and imagination.

One of the virtues of Borges's fiction is the superb precision and polish of the Spanish. Another is a fine and at times almost imperceptibly subtle humor, which retains its completely straight face while holding up to ridicule the soberest of literary and historical essays, like, for example, the present one. It was doubtless part of Borges's literary mission that as I write these words, with the sobriety the subject calls for, I am constantly reminding myself that I sound suspiciously like that voice which he enjoys parodying.

It is as though I am writing about a character as imaginary as Pierre Menard, the eponymous hero of one of Borges's most popular and most insistently quoted stories. Probably it surprised the humble Borges that so much was always being made of this story, but there persist to this day certain circles in which it is quoted without explanation as the key point in any discussion of literature, or, indeed, of anything else. The story claims to be little more than a bibliography and analysis of the works of Pierre Menard, a twentieth-century writer and pedant who has undertaken to write, in seventeenth-century Spanish, a version of *Don Quixote* that will be in every detail identical to the original. Through concerted study, the hero of the piece manages to reproduce exactly whole sentences on end, and the author of the "essay" energetically makes much of the result, considering it to be much better than the original, since Cervantes was merely expressing himself in his own language while Menard was mastering

1 Borges's poetry is available in three English-language volumes: *Selected Poems 1923-1967,* translated by Norman T. di Giovanni et al. (Delacorte, 1972); *The Gold of the Tigers* (selected later poems), translated by Alastair Reid (Dutton, 1977); and *Dreamtigers* (selected poems together with stories), translated by Harold Morland and Mildred Boyer (University of Texas Press, 1964). The translations in this essay are my own.



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an alien idiom and an archaic style. The piece is good fun, but any attempt to adduce it in support of the more abstruse claims of structuralism or deconstruction—for instance, that literature is merely a language game, closed off from the world it ostensibly refers to—would doubtless have produced in its author one of those charming admissions of total mystification that he made so often in his interviews.

Another Borges story that has become totemic for the wrong reasons is "The Library at Babel," in which the narrator, who has spent his life in the massive and seemingly endless structure of the library, presents, in tracing the bizarre history of the institution, what is doubtless intended as a metaphor of man's quest for meaning in the universe. As might be expected in the context of contemporary literary criticism, much has been made of this story, which can be understood to reduce everything to a text or to a rigorously ordered system. What exactly Borges meant by it is hard to say. Perhaps the best answer lies in his principal inspiration, the cabala, that arcane system of scriptural interpretation whose enigmatic questions are intended to enhance our wonder at the inscrutable mystery and invisible order of the universe.

In the first of Borges's collections of fiction, *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), Borges depicted various cases of evil in history. Throughout the book, he is as much at home in eighteenth-century China as he is in the antebellum South or in the New York gangland of the 1920s. He is at pains never to offer explanations for the behavior of his protagonists, since he is interested in presenting their transgressions as almost neutral acts of the physical universe. Here and in other later "fictions"—like *Historia de la eternidad* (1936), *Ficciones* (1941), *El Aleph* (1949), and *El informe de Brodie* (1970)—Borges shows himself over and over again to be essentially antimodernist. Although the form this antimodernism takes may seem in a curious way contemporary, it could be argued that Borges was merely returning to an earlier form of fiction writing, in which the author took care to persuade the reader that in his hand the reader was holding a piece of expository prose of as great an objective validity as any history of the Roman Empire. Borges's short prose pieces in *Historia universal de la infamia,* for instance, call to mind those popular short stories of the late nineteenth century that described historical crimes in exotic places, by writers like Louis Couperus and Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, whom Borges is likely to have read. The expository form also afforded Borges the opportunity to parody that bookishness which, he claimed, had been developed in him at a very early age. This same bookishness, as well as a general sense of privacy, probably convinced him early on that he would never excel in a mode of fiction that attempted to depict reality by conventional dramatic means. But that Borges was better at characterization than he thought is reflected in those occasional and thoroughly persuasive passages of dialogue that are sometimes included within the context of his expository fiction.[2]

An interesting parallel suggests itself between Borges and Italo Calvino, and in their differences as well as in their similarities you will find manifested the shifting loyalties of

2 Borges's prose volumes are available from several publishers. From Dutton, translated by Norman T. di Giovanni: *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969* (1979), *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1979), *The Book of Sand* (1979), *Dr. Brodie's Report* (1979), *In Praise of Darkness* (1974), *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi* (1981), *Evaristo Carriego* (1984), and *A Universal History of Infamy* (1979); translated by Anthony Kerrigan: *Atlas* (1985); from Grove Press: *Ficciones* (edited and with an introduction by Anthony Kerrigan, 1962) and *A Personal Anthology* (edited by Anthony Kerrigan, 1967); from New Directions: *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, 1969) and *Seven Nights* (translated by Eliot Weinberger, 1984); from University of Texas Press: *Other Inquisitions* (translated by Ruth L. Simms, 1964); from Rizzoli: *Congress of the World* (translated by Alberto Manguel, 1980).



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a generation. For, while the recently deceased Calvino remains very much a writer of the moment, Borges, one is sad to report, has probably had his day. This is not to say that he is no longer read, or no longer admired, since the spate of laudatory articles that his death occasioned handsomely confirmed the esteem in which he had been held internationally for a generation. And yet, he no longer means to the general literary public as much as he did only ten years ago.

On one level, the similarity between the two writers is uncanny and unavoidable. Though Calvino wrote novels, which Borges never did, both writers are most effective at diminutive fiction work, both like to show off in a frivolous way their fanfare of erudition, and both have a great affection for mathematical and semantic models of the universe, expressed in the labyrinths of Borges and the invisible cities of Calvino. Yet despite their similarities, a single and minute difference reveals the gap of an entire generation. For Borges saw himself as something of a cabalist, and Calvino considered himself something of a semiotician. In Borges, the repeated forays into numerology, puns, labyrinths, and puzzles presuppose a direct if occult correspondence between the adventitious ciphers on the page and the secret workings and orders of the universe as a whole. In the case of Calvino, however, an almost identical set of machinery purports to explain nothing of the universe in all its infinite secrets, but rather makes bold to reduce the entirety of the universe to the symbols on the page. It is the notion of the system itself, rather than that which underpins it, that means so much to the Italian author.

Now generations manage through a kind of natural selection to choose for their own uses not necessarily the fittest authors but rather those authors who are most apt to give them what they want, and to reveal them to themselves in as flattering a way as possible. It is in this sense that both Calvino and Borges, irrespective of the level of excellence that each attained, were pushed by an eager public into the forefront of fashion for reasons that were not directly germane to the standards of their writings. In the Sixties, when Borges first attained a large audience outside of Argentina, he could readily be assimilated into a culture that had turned its back upon the drab realities that surrounded it, that craved disorder, exoticism, and the illogic of dreams. That Borges would probably not have looked with much sympathy upon such developments had nothing to do with the role that such cooptation required him to play. But the lords of taste have repented in due course, as they always will, of their earlier orthodoxies, and the reigning taste for postmodernist neatness and order, along with suspenders and bow ties, has found in Calvino an author more to their liking.

But Borges was a hammer and Calvino merely an anvil. Somewhere in the early Seventies, Calvino evolved into that affection for semiotics for which the way had been paved by years of French intellectual agitation. Borges, on the other hand, did not change with the times. Rather, the writing he had practiced for over two generations was finally found to fit a context, and so he was taken on by the young crowd and lionized by them. One of the things that must strike most of the readers of his early writings is that they reveal a man very much like the later Borges, whom all the world would cherish, but who would have to wait until he was in his sixties before the larger public had any use for him. His poetry, it is true, had changed its form from something akin to Whitman into a formalism as punctilious as any in modern times. But his philosophy, taking its inspiration from Surrealism and Dadaism, returns constantly to the same motifs, so that even in his earliest poetry we find the fascination that dreams, mirrors, labyrinths, and puzzles always exerted upon his imagination.

One more author with whom Borges might profitably be compared is Nabokov, whose novel *Pale Fire* attempts to do precisely what Borges specialized in throughout his life, namely to parody the pettiness and wayward self-importance of literary scholarship. Just



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as Nabokov presented *Pale Fire* as an authoritative edition of a long poem, together with a preliminary essay and abundant notes, so Borges is constantly pretending—as in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (which includes notes on three imaginary books) and "Pierre Menard"—that he is writing nothing more than a dispassionate bibliography and discussion of a writer or a subject. Thus, although it is difficult to say whether any of the three men, Borges, Calvino, and Nabokov, learned anything from one another, it is striking that they should all be writing "fictions" that are in many ways quite similar. But of the three men, I believe that Borges practices this sleight of hand with the foremost artistry, since he attempts and succeeds in attaining something higher than mere humor. When Calvino tries his hand at "fictions," he is almost trying to show off how well he can get along without the traditional baggage of fiction. Nabokov tells a story, it is true, but since he is principally creating parody of a rather exotic order he is not especially interested in making his characters live and breathe. In Borges, however, the characters that are spun out of the dour context of the scholarly essay are instilled with a life of their own, and they are able to move us in a way that those of Nabokov cannot, and those of Calvino seldom do. Borges was not as comic and entertaining as Nabokov, nor as willfully inventive as Calvino, but you will find in him an unlimited sympathy for human beings and the irreducible vitality of the characters thus created, even through such an economy of means, places him in a higher order of creativity.

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# The case of Harry Houdini

## *by Daniel Mark Epstein*

When my grandfather was a boy he saw the wild-haired magician escape from a riveted boiler. He would remember that image as long as he lived, and how Harry Houdini, the rabbi's son, defeated the German Imperial Police at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hearing those tales and others even more incredible, sixty years after the magician's death we cannot help but wonder: What did the historical Houdini *really* do? And how on earth did he do it?

The newspaper accounts are voluminous, and consistent. The mere cataloguing of Houdini's escapes soon grows tedious, which they were not, to be sure, in the flesh. But quickly: the police stripped him naked and searched him thoroughly before binding his wrists and ankles with five pairs of irons. Then they would slam him into a cell and turn the key of a three-bond burglar-proof lock. He escaped, hundreds of times, from the most secure prisons in the world. He hung upside down in a straitjacket from the tallest buildings in America, and escaped in full view of the populace. He was chained hand and foot and nailed into a packing case weighted with lead; the packing case was dropped from a tugboat into New York's East River and ninety seconds later Houdini surfaced. The packing case was hauled up intact, with the manacles inside, still fastened. He was sealed into a paper bag and got out without disturbing the seal. He was sewn into a huge football, into the belly of a whale, and escaped. In California he was buried six feet underground, and clawed his way out. He did this, he did that. These are facts that cannot be exaggerated, for they were conceived as exaggerations. We know he did these things because his actions were more public than the proceedings of Congress, and most of them he performed over and over, so no one would miss the point.

How did he do such things? For all rational people who are curious, sixty years after the magician's death, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that we know how the vast majority of Houdini's tricks were done, and the explanations are as fascinating as the mystery was. Much of our knowledge comes from the magician's writings, for Houdini kept ahead of his imitators by exposing his cast-off tricks. We have additional information from technicians and theater historians. No magician will reveal Houdini's secrets—their code forbids it. But so much controversy has arisen concerning his powers—so much conjecture they may have been supernatural—that extraordinary measures have been taken to assure us Houdini was a *mortal* genius. Many secrets have leaked out, and others have been discovered from examining the props. So at last we know more about Houdini's technique than any other magician's.

The disturbing news is that, sixty years after his last performance, some of his more spectacular escapes remain unexplained. And while magicians such as Doug Henning are bound not to expose their colleagues, they



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are free to admit what mystifies them. They know how Houdini walked through the brick wall at Hammerstein's Roof Garden, in 1914, but they do not know how he made the elephant disappear in 1918. This trick he performed only for a few months in New York. And when people asked him why he did not continue he told them that Teddy Roosevelt, a great hunter, had begged him to stop before he exhausted the world's supply of pachyderms.

But before we grapple with the mysteries, let us begin with what we can understand. Let us begin with my grandfather's favorite story, the case of Harry Houdini versus the German Police. Houdini's first tour of Europe depended upon the good will and cooperation of the law. When he arrived in London in 1900 the twenty-six-year-old magician did not have a single booking. His news clippings eventually inspired an English agent, who had Houdini manacled to a pillar in Scotland Yard. Seeing that Houdini was securely fastened, Superintendent Melville of the Criminal Investigation Department said he would return in a couple of hours, when the escapist had worn himself out. By the time Melville got to the door the magician was free to open it for him.

The publicity surrounding his escape from the most prestigious police force in the world opened up many another door for the young magician. Booked at the Alhambra Theater in London, he performed his "Challenge" handcuff act, which had made him famous on the vaudeville circuit. After some card tricks and standard illusions, Houdini would stand before the proscenium and challenge the world to restrain him with ropes, straitjackets, handcuffs, whatever they could bring on, from lockshops, prisons, and museums. A single failure might have ruined him. There is no evidence that he ever failed, though in several cases he nearly died from the effort required to escape from sadistic shackles. The "Challenge" act filled the Alhambra Theater for two months. Houdini might have stayed there if Germany had not already booked him; the Germans could hardly wait to get a look at Houdini.

As he had done in America and England, Houdini began his tour of Germany with a visit to police headquarters. The Dresden officers were not enthusiastic, yet they could hardly refuse the magician's invitation to lock him up. That might suggest a crisis of confidence. And like their colleagues the world over, the Dresden police viewed Houdini's news clippings as so much paper in the balance with their locks and chains. Of course the Dresden police had no more success than those of Kansas City, or San Francisco, or Scotland Yard. Their manacles were paper to him. The police chief reluctantly signed the certificate Houdini demanded, but the newspapers gave him little coverage.

So on his opening night at Dresden's Central Theatre, Houdini arranged to be fettered in the leg irons and manacles of the Mathildegasse Prison. Some of the locks weighed forty pounds. The audience, packed to the walls, went wild over his escape, and the fact that he spoke their language further endeared him. If anything could have held him captive it would have been the adoring burghers of Dresden, who mobbed the theater for weeks. The manager wanted to buy out Houdini's contract with the Wintergarten of Berlin, so as to hold him over in Dresden, but the people of Berlin could not wait to see the magician.

Houdini arrived in Berlin in October of 1900. The first thing he did was march into the police station, strip stark naked, and challenge the jailors. They could not hold him. This time Count von Windheim, the highest ranking policeman in Germany, signed the certificate of Houdini's escape. The Wintergarten was overrun. The management appealed to the theater of Houdini's next engagement, in Vienna, so they might hold him over an extra month in Berlin. The Viennese finally yielded, demanding an indemnity equal to Houdini's salary for one month. When the magician, at long last, opened at the Olympic Theater in Paris, in December of 1901, he was the highest paid foreign entertainer in French history.

But meanwhile there was big trouble



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brewing in Germany. It seems the police there had little sense of humor about Houdini's peculiar gifts, and the Jew had quickly exhausted what little there was. In Dortmund he escaped from the irons that had bound Glowisky, a notorious murderer, beheaded three days before. At Hanover the police chief, Count von Schwerin, plotted to disgrace Houdini, challenging him to escape from a special straitjacket reinforced with thick leather. Houdini agonized for one and a half hours while von Schwerin looked on, his jubilant smile melting in wonder, then rage, as the magician worked himself free.

The cumulative anger of the German police went public in July of 1901. Inspector Werner Graff witnessed Houdini's escape from all the manacles at the Cologne police station and vowed to end the humiliation. It was not a simple matter of pride. Graff, along with von Schwerin and other officials, feared Houdini was weakening their authority and inviting jailbreaks, if not other kinds of antisocial behavior. So Graff wrote a letter to Cologne's newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*. The letter stated that Houdini had escaped from simple restraints at the police headquarters, by trickery; but his publicity boasted he could escape from restraints *of any kind*. Such a claim, Graff wrote, was a lie, and Houdini ought to be prosecuted for fraud.

Though he knew the letter was nonsense the magician could not ignore it, for it was dangerous nonsense. If the police began calling him a fraud in every town he visited, Houdini would lose his audience. So he demanded that Graff apologize and the newspaper publish a retraction. Graff refused, and other German dailies reprinted his letter. Should Harry Houdini sue the German policeman for libel? Consider the circumstances. Germany, even in 1901, was one of the most authoritarian states in the world. Houdini was an American, a Jew who embarrassed the police. A libel case against Graff would turn upon the magician's claim that he could escape from *any* restraint, and the courtroom would become an international theater. There a German judge and jury would try his skill, and, should they find it wanting, Houdini would be washed up, exiled to play beer halls and dime museums. Only an artist with colossal pride and total confidence in his methods would act as Houdini did. He hired the most prominent trial lawyer in Cologne, and ordered him to sue Werner Graff and the Imperial Police of Germany for criminal libel.

There was standing room only in the Cologne *Schöffengericht*. The judge allowed Werner Graff to seek out the most stubborn locks and chains he could find, and tangle Houdini in them, in full view of everyone. Here was a hitch, for Houdini did not wish to show the crowd his technique. He asked the judge to clear the courtroom, and in the ensuing turmoil the magician released himself so quickly no one knew how he had done it. The *Schöffengericht* fined the astonished policeman and ordered a public apology. So Graff's lawyer appealed the case.

Two months later Graff was better prepared. In the *Strafkammer,* or court of appeals, he presented thirty letters from legal authorities declaring that the escape artist could not justify his advertisements. And Graff had a shiny new pair of handcuffs. The premier locksmith of Germany had engineered the cuffs especially for the occasion. Werner Graff explained to the judge that the lock, once closed, could never be opened, even with its own key. Let Houdini try to get out of these.

This time the court permitted Houdini to work in privacy, and a guard led the magician to an adjacent chamber. Everyone else settled down for a long wait, in a chatter of anticipation. They were interrupted four minutes later by the entrance of Houdini, who tossed the manacles on the judge's bench. So the *Strafkammer* upheld the lower court's decision, as did the *Oberlandesgericht* in a "paper" appeal. The court fined Werner Graff thirty marks and ordered him to pay for the trials as well as a published apology. Houdini's next poster showed him in evening dress, his hands manacled, standing before the judge, jurors, and a battery of mustachioed policemen. Looking down on



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the scene is a bust of the Kaiser against a crimson background, and a scroll that reads: "The Imperial Police of Cologne slandered Harry Houdini . . . were compelled to advertise 'An Honorary Apology' and pay costs of the trials. By command of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany."

Now this is surely a wondrous tale, like something out of the Arabian Nights, and it will seem no less wonderful when we understand the technique that made it come true. In 1901, when Houdini took on the Imperial Police, he was not whistling in the dark. By the time he left America at the end of the nineteenth century he had dissected every kind of lock he could find in the New World, and whatever he could import from the old one. Arriving in London Houdini could write that there were only a few kinds of British handcuffs, "seven or eight at the utmost," and these were some of the simplest he had ever seen. He searched the markets, antique shops, and locksmiths, buying up all the European locks he could find so he could dismantle and study them.

Then during his Berlin engagement he worked up to ten hours a day at Mueller's locksmith on the Mittelstrasse, studying restraints. He was the Bobby Fischer of locks. With a chessmaster's foresight Houdini devised a set of picks to release every lock in existence, as well as *any he could imagine.* Such tireless ingenuity produced the incandescent light bulb and the atom bomb. Houdini's creation of a theatrical metaphor made a comparable impact on the human spirit. He had a message which he delivered so forcefully it goes without mentioning in theater courses: humankind cannot be held in chains. The European middle class had reached an impressionable age, and the meaning of Houdini's theater was not lost upon them. Nor was he mistaken by the aristocracy, who stayed away in droves. The spectacle of this American Jew bursting from chains by dint of ingenuity did not amuse the rich. They wanted desperately to demythologize him.

It was not about to happen in the German courtroom. When Werner Graff snapped the "new" handcuffs on Houdini, they were not strange to the magician. He had already invented them, so to speak, as well as the pick to open them, and the pick was in his pocket. Only a locksmith whose knowledge surpassed Houdini's could stop him; diligent study assured him that, as of 1901, there could be no such locksmith on the face of the earth.

What else can we understand about the methods of Harry Houdini, born Ehrich Weiss? We know he was a superbly conditioned athlete who did not smoke or take a drop of alcohol. His straitjacket escapes he performed in full view of the world so they could see it was by main force and flexibility that he freed himself. He may or may not have been able to dislocate his shoulders at will—he said he could, and it seems no more marvelous than certain other skills he demonstrated. Friends reported that his toes could untie knots most of us could not manage with our fingers. And routinely the magician would hold his breath for as long as four minutes to work underwater escapes. To cheapen the supernatural claims of the fakir Rahman Bey, Houdini remained underwater in an iron box for ninety minutes, as against the Egyptian's sixty. Examining Houdini, a physician testified that the fifty-year-old wizard had halved his blood pressure while doubling his pulse. Of course, more wonderful than any of these skills was the courage allowing him to employ them, in predicaments where any normal person would panic.

These things are known about Houdini. The same tireless ingenuity, when applied to locks and jails, packing cases and riveted boilers; the same athletic prowess, when applied at the bottom of the East River, or while dangling from a rope attached to the cornice of the Sun Building in Baltimore—these talents account for the vast majority of Houdini's exploits. As we have mentioned, theater historians, notably Raymund Fitzsimons in his *Death and the Magician,* have carefully exposed Houdini's ingenuity, knowing that nothing can tarnish the



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miracle of the man's existence. Their accounts are technical and we need not dwell on them, except to say they *mostly* support Houdini's oath that his effects were achieved by natural, or mechanical means. The Houdini problem arises from certain outrageous effects no one has ever been able to explain, though capable technicians have been trying for more than sixty years.

Let us briefly recall those effects. We have mentioned the Disappearing Elephant. On January 7, 1918, Houdini had a ten-thousand-pound elephant led onto the bright stage of the Hippodrome in New York City. A trainer marched the elephant around a cabinet large enough for an elephant, proving there was space behind. There was no trapdoor in the floor of the Hippodrome, and the elephant could not fly. Houdini ushered the pachyderm into the cabinet and closed the curtains. Then he opened them, and where the elephant had stood there was nothing but empty space. Houdini went on with his program, which might have been making the Hippodrome disappear, for all the audience knew. A reporter for the *Brooklyn Eagle* noted: "The program says that the elephant vanished into thin air. The trick is performed fifteen feet from the backdrop and the cabinet is slightly elevated. That explanation is as good as any." After Houdini stopped making elephants disappear, nineteen weeks later, the trick would never be precisely duplicated.

That is the single "conventional" illusion of Houdini's repertoire that remains unexplained. He was not the greatest illusionist of his time, though he was among them. His expertise was the "escape" act, that specialty of magic furthest removed from theater, for its challenges are quite real and sometimes beyond the magician's control. It was the escapes, as his wife later wrote, that were truly dangerous, and Houdini privately admitted some anxieties about them. Give a wizard twenty years to build a cabinet which snuffs an elephant, and you will applaud his cleverness if he succeeds, in the controlled environment of his theater. But surrender the same man, stark naked, to the Russian police, who stake their honor upon detaining him in a convict van, and you may well suspect the intercession of angels should he get out.

And that is exactly what Houdini did, in one of the strangest and most celebrated escapes of his career. Strange, because it was Houdini's habit to escape only from barred jail cells where the locks were within easy reach, and then only after inspection, so he might hide picks in crannies, or excuse himself if he foresaw failure. But the Siberian Transport Cell made his blood boil. On May 11, 1903, the chief of the Russian secret police searched the naked Houdini inside and out. The revolt of 1905 was in its planning stages and the Imperial Police were understandably touchy. The magician's wrists were padlocked and his ankles fettered before the police locked him into the *carette*. Mounted on a wagon, the zinc-lined steel cell stood in the prison courtyard in view of chief Lebedoeff, his staff, and a number of civilians. Twenty-eight minutes later Houdini was walking around the courtyard, stretching. Nobody saw him get out, but he was out. The police ran to the door of the *carette*. The door was still locked and the shackles lay on the floor of the undamaged van. The police were so furious they would not sign the certificate of escape, but so many people had witnessed the event that the news was soon being shouted all over Moscow. Doug Henning has written: "It remains one of his escapes about which the real method is pure conjecture."

In the Houdini Museum at Niagara Falls, Canada, you may view the famous Mirror Handcuffs. If you are a scholar you can inspect them. In March of 1904 the London *Daily Mirror* discovered a blacksmith who had been working for five years to build a set of handcuffs no mortal man could pick. Examining the cuffs, the best locksmiths in London agreed they had never seen such an ingenious mechanism. The newspaper challenged Houdini to escape from them. On March 17, before a house of four thousand in the London Hippodrome, a journalist fastened the cuffs on Houdini's wrists and



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turned the key six times. The magician retired to his cabinet onstage, and the band struck up a march. He did not emerge for twenty minutes. When he did, it was to hold the lock up to the light. Remember that most "Challenge" handcuffs were regulation, and familiar to Houdini. He studied the lock in the light, and then went back into the cabinet, as the band played a waltz.

Ten minutes later Houdini stuck his head out, asking if he could have a cushion to kneel on. He was denied. After almost an hour Houdini came out of the cabinet again, obviously worn out, and his audience groaned. He wanted the handcuffs to be unlocked for a moment so he could take off his coat, as he was sweating profusely. The journalist denied the request, since Houdini had never before seen the handcuffs unlocked, and that might give him an advantage. Whereupon Houdini, in full view of the four thousand, extracted a penknife from his pocket and opened it with his teeth. Turning the coat inside out over his head, he shredded it loose with the penknife, and returned to the cabinet. Someone called out that Houdini had been handcuffed for more than an hour. As the band played on, the journalists of the London *Daily Mirror* could taste the greatest scoop of the twentieth century. But ten minutes later there was a cry from the cabinet and Houdini leapt out of it, free, waving the handcuffs high in the air. While the crowd roared, several men from the audience carried Houdini on their shoulders around the theater. He was crying as if his heart would break.

For all his other talents Houdini was a notoriously wooden actor, and we may assume the rare tears were altogether real, the product of an uncounterfeitable emotion. It is as if the man himself had been overwhelmed by his escape. Eighty years of technological progress have shed no light upon it. We know how Houdini got out of other handcuffs, but not these. As far as anyone can tell, the Mirror Handcuffs remain as the blacksmith described them—a set of handcuffs no mortal man could pick. One is tempted to dismiss the whole affair as mass hypnosis.

In the same Canadian museum you may view the Chinese Water Torture Cell, in which the magician was hung upside down, in water, his ankles padlocked to the riveted roof. His escape from this cell was the crowning achievement of his stage career, and though he performed it on tour during the last ten years of his life, no one has the slightest notion how he did it. The gifted Doug Henning revived the act in 1975, on television. But he would be the first to tell you his was *not* Houdini's version, but his own, and he would not do it onstage before a live audience seven nights a week, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday, because the trick would be unspeakably dangerous even if he could perform it there. When Houdini died he willed the contraption to his brother Hardeen, a fine magician in his own right. But Hardeen would not get in it either, and the instructions were to be burned upon his death. Again, as with the Vanishing Elephant, we are reviewing a stage illusion under controlled conditions, and may bow to a master's technical superiority, without fretting that he has used supernatural powers.

But the Mirror Handcuffs and the Siberian Van Escape are troublesome, as are certain of Houdini's escapes from reinforced straitjackets, and packing cases underwater. So is the fact that he was buried six feet underground, and clawed his way out. He only tried it once, and nearly died in the struggle, but the feat was attested, and you do not need a degree in physics to know it is as preposterous as rising from the dead. The weight of the earth is so crushing you could not lift it in the open air. Try doing this with no oxygen. The maestro himself misjudged the weight, and, realizing his folly, tried to signal his crew when the grave was not yet full. They could not hear him and kept right on shoveling as fast as they could, so as not to keep him waiting. Then they stood back, to watch. A while later they saw his bleeding hands appear above the ground.

If we find Houdini's record unsettling, imagine what our grandparents must have thought of him. They knew almost nothing



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of his technique. Where we remain troubled by a few of his illusions and escapes, our ancestors were horrified by most of them. The European journalists thought he was some kind of hobgoblin, a shapeshifter who could crawl through keyholes, or dematerialize and reappear at will. One can hardly blame them. Despite his constant reassurances that his effects were technical, and natural, the practical-minded layman could not believe it, and even fellow magicians were disturbed by his behavior.

So we come to the central issue in the case of Harry Houdini. It is an issue he carefully avoided in public, while studying it diligently in private. To wit: Can a magician, by the ultimate perfection of a technique, generate a force which, at critical moments, will achieve a supernatural result? Houdini's writings show this was the abiding concern of his intellectual life. It is, of course, the essential mystery of classical magic since before the Babylonians. Yet it remained a private and professional concern until Houdini's career forced it upon the public.

With the same determination that opened the world's locks, Houdini searched for an answer. His own technique was so highly evolved that its practice might have satisfied him, but his curiosity was unquenchable. He amassed the world's largest collection of books pertaining to magic and the occult, and no less a scholar than Edmund Wilson honored Houdini's authority. The son of a rabbi, Houdini pursued his studies with rabbinic thoroughness. And, from the beginning of his career, he sought out the living legends of magic and badgered them in retirement, sometimes with tragicomic results.

As far back as 1895 it seemed to Houdini something peculiar was going on when he performed the Metamorphosis with his wife Bess. You have probably seen this classic illusion. Two friends of mine once acted it in my living room, as a birthday present. When the Houdinis performed the Metamorphosis, Bess would handcuff Harry, tie him in a sack, and lock him in a trunk. She would draw a curtain hiding the trunk and then it would open, showing Houdini free upon the stage. Where was Bess? Inside the trunk, inside the sack, handcuffed—there was Bess. The method of this trick is only mysterious if you cannot pay for it. But the Houdinis' *timing* of the Metamorphosis got very mysterious indeed. They polished the act until it happened in less than three seconds—three rather blurred seconds in their own minds, to be sure. Believe me, you cannot get *in*to the trunk in less than three seconds. So when the Houdinis had done the trick they were often as stunned as their audience. It seemed a sure case of technique unleashing a supernatural force. Perplexed, Houdini planned to interview Hermann the Great, the preeminent conjuror in America in 1895, and ask Hermann what was up. But Hermann died as Houdini was about to ask him the question.

And Houdini shadowed the marvelous Harry Kellar, cross-examining him, and Alexander Heimburger, and the decrepit Ira Davenport, who had been a medium as well as a magician. But the great magicians flatly denied the psychic possibility, and Davenport would not answer to Houdini's satisfaction. In 1903 he discovered that Wiljalba Frikell, a seemingly mythic wizard of the nineteenth century, was still alive, in retirement near Dresden. When the ancient mage would not acknowledge his letters, Houdini grew convinced Wiljalba Frikell was the man to answer his question. He took the train to Dresden and knocked on Frikell's door. His wife sent Houdini away. On the road in Germany and Russia, Houdini continued to send letters and gifts to Frikell. And at last, six months after he had been turned away from Frikell's door, the reclusive magician agreed to see him.

Houdini rang the doorbell at 2:00 p.m. on October 8, 1903, the exact hour of his appointment. The door swung open. An hour earlier Wiljalba Frikell had dressed in his best suit, and laid out his scrapbooks, programs, and medals for Houdini to view. Houdini excitedly followed Frikell's wife into the room where the master sat sur-



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rounded by the mementos of his glorious career. But he would not be answering any of the questions that buzzed in Houdini's brain. The old man was stone dead.

Throughout his life Houdini categorically denied that any of his effects were achieved by supernatural means. He crusaded against mediums, clairvoyants, and all who claimed psychic power, advertising that he would reproduce any of their manifestations by mechanical means. In the face of spiritualists who accused *him* of being a physical medium, he protested that all his escapes and illusions were tricks. He was probably telling the truth, as he understood it. But Rabbi Drachman, who spoke at Houdini's funeral, and had been in a position to receive confidences, said: "Houdini possessed a wondrous power that he never understood, and which he never revealed to anyone in life."

Houdini was not Solomon; he was a vaudeville specialist. If he ever experienced a psychic power it surely humbled his understanding. And to admit such a power, in his position, would have been a monumental stupidity. Why? If for no other reason, Talmudic law forbids the performance of miracles, and Houdini was the obedient son of Rabbi Weiss. Also, in case he should forget the Jewish law, it is strictly against the magician's code to claim a supernatural power, for reasons impossible to ignore. Mediums made such claims, at their own risk. Two of the more famous mediums of the nineteenth century, Ira and William Davenport, achieved manifestations similar to Houdini's. Audiences in Liverpool, Leeds, and Paris rioted, stormed the stage, and ran the mediums out of town, crying their performances were an outrage against God and a danger to man. Whether or not the acts were supernatural is beside the point—billing them as such was bad business, and hazardous to life and limb. Yet the Davenports were no more than a sideshow, compared to Houdini. The man was blinding. There had not been such a public display of apparent miracles in nearly two thousand years. Had the Jew so much as hinted his powers were spiritual he might have expected no better treatment than the renegade Hebrew of Nazareth.

Houdini was the self-proclaimed avatar of nothing but good old American know-how, and that is how he wished to be remembered. His wife of thirty years, Beatrice Houdini (known as "Bess"), was loyal to him in this, as in all other things. Pestered for revelations about Houdini's magic long after his death, the widow swore by her husband's account. But against her best intentions, Bess clouded the issue by saying just a little more than was necessary. It was in a letter to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who had been a close friend of hers and Houdini's.

The friendship was an odd one. The author of Sherlock Holmes believed in Spiritualism, and championed the séance with all the fervor with which Houdini opposed it. There were two great mysteries in Doyle's life: the powers of Sherlock Holmes and Harry Houdini. Doyle knew the Houdinis intimately, and nothing the magician said could shake Sir Arthur's conviction that certain of Houdini's escapes were supernatural. Doyle never stopped trying to get Houdini to confess. In 1922 it was more than a personal issue. The séance had become big business in America, with millions of bereaved relatives paying to communicate with their dear departed. Spiritualism was a homegrown, persuasive religious movement, a bizarre reaction to American science and pragmatism. The great critic Edmund Wilson, who admired Houdini and understood his gifts, recognized that the magician had appeared at a critical moment in the history of Spiritualism. Houdini was the only man living who had the authority, and the competence, to expose the predatory mediums, and his success was decisive.

Yet Houdini's lecture-demonstrations, and exposures of false mediums, only fueled Doyle's suspicions that his friend was the real thing, a physical medium. In all fairness, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a credulous old gentleman, who knew nothing of Houdini's techniques. But his instinct was sound. Two



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months after Houdini died, Sir Arthur wrote to Bess in despair of ever learning the truth from the magician's lips, and she wrote Doyle a long letter. What concerns us here are a few sentences which, coming from the woman who shared his life and work, and maintained her loyalty to Houdini alive and dead, we must regard as altogether startling.

> I will never be offended by anything you say for him or about him, but that he possessed psychic powers—he never knew it. As I told Lady Doyle often he would get a difficult lock, I stood by the cabinet and I would hear him say, "This is beyond me," and after many minutes when the audience became restless I nervously would say "Harry, if there is anything in this belief in Spiritism,—why don't you call on them to assist you," and before many minutes had passed Houdini had mastered the lock.
>
> We never attributed this to psychic help. We just knew that that particular instrument was the one to open that lock, and so did all his tricks.

The tone of this letter penned so soon after her husband's death is somber throughout, painfully sincere. This was not a subject for levity, this being the central issue in the life of Harry Houdini. So what on earth is Bess trying to tell Sir Arthur when she testifies to the invocation of spirits in one sentence, and repudiates psychic help in the next? What kind of double-talk is this, when the widow refers to the summoning of spiritual aid as "that particular instrument," as if a spirit were no different from any other skeleton key? It sounds like sheer euphemism; it sounds like the Houdinis' lifetime of work had uncovered a power so terrifying they would not admit it to each other, let alone the world. Would that Albert Einstein had been so discreet in 1905.

So what if Harry Houdini, once in a while, "spirited" himself out of a Siberian Van, or a pair of Mirror Handcuffs, or a packing case at the bottom of the East River? It is perhaps no more remarkable than that an American Jew won a verdict against the German Police for criminal libel in 1901, or reversed a religious movement in America in 1922. Houdini died in Detroit on Halloween in 1926, of acute appendicitis. He was born in Budapest on March 24, 1874, but told the world he was born in Appleton, Wisconsin on April 6. Not until after World War II did Americans discover that their greatest magician was an alien. Houdini's work was no more miraculous than his life. His life was no more miraculous than the opening and closing of a flower.



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# Vulgarity, novelty, and politics in contemporary art

## *by Charles W. Millard*

*Comparatively few people care for art at all, and most of them care for it because they mistake it for something else.*
—Arthur Symons

Recent attitudes toward art have thrust what has traditionally been known as high art into the shade, and placed its admirers on the defensive. While this situation is sensed as a unique crisis by many, it is in fact the continuation of a long development. The apparent threat is considerably ameliorated by the fact that high art continues to be made and that history suggests that it will, by the reverse of Gresham's law that has always characterized it, triumph in the end. Good art has never failed to drive out bad by the sheer staying power of its aesthetic—that is to say, emotional—conviction.

Art that is less good has tended to capture general attention quickly and easily at least since the time of the French Revolution, when the first glimmerings of the change that was to produce modernism were to be seen. Never before now has such art been so noisily victorious, however. In part this is due to the growth and sophistication of the processes of publicity. In larger part, it is due to the tremendous increase in an affluent and more or less well-educated audience, particularly in the United States. This audience consumes painting and sculpture in ever greater quantities. It does this from traditional motives of status, and probably from the unconscious realization that, despite the secularization of society, art has remained a tangible repository of spiritual value. It does it also in pursuit of fashion. The distinction between art and fashion has become increasingly elided as the demand for art has grown—an elision assisted by the fact that both art and fashion deal in taste. Since the supply of the best art is inevitably limited, increasing demand has meant an increasing focus on art that is less good and on objects that are not art at all, which the public is asked to accept as if they were high art.

For better or worse, art is an exclusive enterprise. At its best it is known and understood by relatively few people. Those few are not defined by external circumstance—race, religion, nationality, or social class, for example—and art is, in principle, available to anyone. Its exclusivity is a democratic exclusivity. But not everyone has the time or inclination to devote himself to art, nor has everyone the sensitivity or desire to plumb its depths. Art is a difficult and demanding mistress, and understanding it requires not only the desire to do so, but also experience, education, and, in the last analysis, not a little grace. Loving and understanding art is something one does or does not do. It is not an activity to which a moral value is attached. Today, however, it has become widely perceived as good to be concerned with art. This moral sanction gives an aura of desirability to art that is part of its contemporary plight and another element in the



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general popularity that places far too great a burden on it.

The combination of art's essential exclusivity and the democratization of society in the last two hundred years has resulted in vulgarization. As awareness of art increased, and it became more generally seen as desirable, the pressures to make it popular and available by denying its exclusivity increased. Those pressures led more than one artist to weaken his art by straying into obviousness of anecdote or of painterly effect, a sure sign of vulgarization in the most literal sense. One aspect of this vulgarization is the confusion that has arisen between life and art, in particular between politics and art, to the point where there are now constant demands to accept life *as* art. Since there is more life than art, these demands have become increasingly strident as the audience for art has grown and the relative supply of art has diminished. This situation is perhaps exacerbated in a society such as ours, which seems to value what one does more highly than what one is. It had arisen at least by the end of the nineteenth century when abstraction, which seemed to distance art from life, was making sufficient strides that reactions against it began to appear. These reactions took the form of reaffirming subject matter, particularly the human figure—reintroducing "life" into art—and of ameliorating style to make it more generally comprehensible. Mid-century academicism had done this by taking over Romantic subject matter and clothing it in neo-classical style. Symbolism did it by pre-empting Impressionist or post-Impressionist style as the vehicle for a dreamily mystical subject matter. In our own century, Surrealism turned to Freudian dream material, presenting it in an adaptation of Cubist, post-Cubist, or nineteenth-century academic style. Then, more recently, Pop Art, trading on the Abstract Expressionist and hard-edged facture of the 1950s and 1960s, took quotidian objects and the comics as its subjects.

Distinctions in respect to artistic quality can, of course, be made among the products of all these movements, but, generally speaking, each was a vulgarization of contemporary styles or of those immediately preceding. Each further softened these styles by the introduction of relatively accessible anecdotal material. Put another way, each was a form of academicism. As reaction succeeded reaction—for each of these efforts can be seen as a reaction against the direction high art was taking—there was a general decline in quality. The number of interesting Pop works, for example, is far less than the number of interesting Symbolist works. The most recent of these reactions is what is usually termed Neo-Expressionism. "Expressionism," in the sense of loose facture, greater impasto, etc., began to reappear in art around 1970 in the work of several abstract painters. By the end of the decade it had been seized upon by artists both here and abroad as the vehicle for an overblown figuration that had immediate popular and financial success.

As the austerities of abstraction—toward which, for better or worse, high art was moving—were made palatable by the reactions against it, quality came to be seen as tied to novelty. The audience for modern art soon became aware that the great artists of the late nineteenth century had seemed innovative because they revolutionized pictorial structure, producing pictures that did not look like what the audience of their time was accustomed to regard as art. Twentieth-century patrons, determined not to miss out on greatness by slighting experimentation, as their predecessors had done, began to seek out novelty, and even a non-art look, for its own sake, assuming quality would follow. This situation was taken advantage of by figures such as Marcel Duchamp, who also capitalized on the growing inability of even—one wants to say particularly—the educated public to distinguish between important art and important ideas. By contrast, the best art appeared increasingly unremarkable, reversing the situation of a century earlier in which it had seemed very remarkable indeed.

The resulting house of mirrors has been art's home until today. Great art continues



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to be made and sold, but is not much remarked upon in part because it makes few visual claims for itself. It tends to be visually reticent, in part because it grows creatively out of the art of the past, to which it is intimately connected, and bears traces of that paternity. Put crudely, it can look old-fashioned and unadventurous in today's exaggerated artistic climate. Lesser art and substitutes for art are widely disseminated because they look new and, what is today more desirable, shocking, when in fact they trade on watered-down and second-hand ideas. The only true novelty in art, the only thing that continues to surprise, is aesthetic quality.

The inability or unwillingness to perceive quality in art is not limited to the broad art public. Indeed, there are almost certainly more discriminating collectors than curators, directors, or professors. The fear of missing out that has shaped much private collecting is even more pervasive on the boards and staffs of museums. As early as Alfred Barr, one heard the unfortunate opinion that judgments of contemporary art were especially difficult to make—which they were, and are—and that if a museum turned out to have chosen well once in ten times it could be said to have succeeded in its mission. This attitude encouraged an abdication of responsibility, a sort of curatorial cowardice, that led standards to disintegrate to a degree that would be unacceptable in more traditional areas of collecting —prints, for example, or Old Master paintings. Most museums now collecting contemporary art seek either to be representative, the easiest way out, or to be avant-garde, the wrongheaded way out. Many do both. Few on their staffs have the passionate visual engagement characteristic of those who have built major collections of any kind. While there is greater knowledge about art than ever before, feeling for it has declined, and the belief has arisen that critical taste is unnecessary for, or even antithetical to, the creation, selection, and installation of works of art. (In fact, it is crucial to all three.) Nor is this professional perversity limited to museums.

Apparently caught up in the trends that have shaped so much behavior toward contemporary art, university art history departments are increasingly inclined to imply to their students that art is not what it is. Certainly there are many productive approaches to works of art and many uses to which those works can be put. Any well-rounded professional curriculum should have room for them all. The three principal codifications of thought about art are: (1) iconography—art history as literary history, reinterpreted in this century by Freudianism; (2) what Max Dvorak called *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*—art history as social or cultural history, reinterpreted in this century by Marxism; and (3) connoisseurship—art history as the history of style. The first two lead away from the work toward the artist or his society or both. If well done, they help create a contextual climate of understanding for the work. The third leads into the work toward its aesthetic identity. If well done, it helps point to the essential experience of the work. Connoisseurship is the only approach for which the presence of original works of art is essential.

Recent confusions about art have resulted in a tendency to ignore stylistic and aesthetic matters, including the fact that art is a visual language that must be learned in its own terms to be completely understood. Tacitly and superficially, the assumption is made that ideas are art, or are all that matters about art. The vulgarity of the marketplace thus finds its counterpart in intellectual vulgarity, and the two feed on one another, pursuing novelty, working to exclude alternatives, and obfuscating the experience of art. Connoisseurship is now largely considered old-fashioned. The fact that it, or any other intellectual construct, should be regarded in terms of fashion at all is telling of the prejudices to which what had seemed dispassionate intellectual investigation has become prey. As the situation of painting itself has long since demonstrated, concern about art as art is



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today on the defensive and has taken refuge in what is made to look like conservatism.

The fact that words such as conservative and avant-garde, old and new, should arise in relation to art at all suggests the politicization that has gone hand in hand with the rise of modern art and the development of ideas about it. Political and moralizing attitudes and ideas have clung to art ever since David turned it to the service of revolution, happily not to the detriment of his own accomplishment. Those attitudes and ideas have become confused with art and mistaken for it with the passage of time. Attack-and-defense has become the pattern. Rather than internalizing and developing from their predecessors, artists seem to relish reacting against them. I say "seem" because art is now, as it has always been, a continuum that nourishes itself, as well as an activity that is nourished from outside. Those who propagandize with their art diminish it. Similarly, those who propagandize with their ideas diminish them. If the politicization of art is an index of its decline, the politicization of ideas about art evidences a similar decline. Those who politicize art would, of course, have one believe that the decline is on the side of those who choose not to do so.

If art were, indeed, life or politics we would currently be in profound trouble. The spurious liberalism that characterizes many of today's attitudes toward art is the same face used by social change and revolution—from Napoleon to Lenin to Hitler—to mask totalitarianism. This helps explain the traditional alliance between academicism and the absolutist consequences of revolution. What seems to be true and what is in fact true are more than ever opposed in this situation. Much that seems avant-garde in art is in fact academic. Much that seems avant-garde in thought about art is in fact *retardataire*. Much that seems conservative in art, on the other hand, is in fact deeply original, and much that seems conservative in thought about art is in fact to the point. The idea that artistic or intellectual style should be discredited rather than developed from and built upon is a fallacy that encourages unnecessary rupture and in no way contributes to the health and substance of art, thought, or life.

If art's current environment is vulgar, trendy, and politicized, it is a situation produced by those who would use art for other than what it is, too often for their own aggrandizement. Just as there are no laws in art, as a nineteenth-century critic suggested, so art has no political position. High art is one of life's freest products. It survives because it encapsulates and enhances life, which it transforms; and, in surviving, it triumphs.



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# The worldly and unworldly fortunes of Rose Macaulay

*by Gloria G. Fromm*

In her diary in the mid-Twenties, Virginia Woolf, not yet lionized, railed at Rose Macaulay for being too visible: for speaking at dinners, for giving opinions to newspapers, for writing articles for the American press. "Why should she take the field so unnecessarily?" Woolf wanted to know. Answering her own question, she supposed that the "leading lady novelists," all equally dutiful, simply did as they were asked. She herself, of course, was "not quite one of them."

Woolf's remarks have an uneasy ring, if not an uncertain tone, but there is no doubt about Rose Macaulay's ubiquitous presence in the postwar literary world. She had caused a minor sensation in 1920, with *Potterism: A Tragi-Farcical Tract,* her tenth novel and first best-seller, a brilliant, caustic commentary on the noxious influence of the mass media on contemporary life. Virginia Woolf had pronounced it a "donnish" book, "hard-headed" and "masculine," not to her taste at all. But it had launched Rose Macaulay's career, which Woolf followed with considerable interest through the Twenties and into the Thirties. Even as late as 1956, Macaulay's best-seller, *The Towers of Trebizond,* won her high and discriminating praise, of the sort to gratify the most fastidious writer. Yet now, another thirty years later, when women artists are so much in the public eye, she has virtually disappeared from the scene. A curious state of affairs, it is surely worth an attempt to redress the balance and perhaps uncover in the process a Rose Macaulay who even at her zenith had scarcely been seen at all, and whose personal as well as literary character has suffered in unexpected ways from the stigma of success.

Her life as a writer began after a three-year stint at Oxford, from 1900 to 1903, where she read Modern History. By all accounts, she had entered Somerville College a shy and lanky nineteen-year-old and left with the verbal flair and drive of a natural writer. She certainly produced her first novel soon after, while living with her parents in Wales. By the time it appeared in 1906, her family had moved to Cambridge, where George Macaulay, classical and medieval scholar, spent his last ten years as a don at his own university. Long before, in accordance with the ancient requirements still being imposed, he had given up his fellowship to marry; but one of his few worldly ambitions had been to return to Cambridge.

He died in 1915, early in the war, leaving the standard edition of the complete works of John Gower, Chaucer's contemporary, but no record of his response to the seven novels his daughter had already published by then. Along with a volume of poems, they had earned favorable, even enthusiastic reviews and attracted the attention of Naomi Royde-Smith, the colorful party-giving literary editor of the *Saturday Westminster,* in whose pages Rupert Brooke and Walter de la Mare were also publishing their poems. Before the war, Rose Macaulay had become



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the young pet of the circle of *Westminster* writers, based in Royde-Smith's South Kensington flat and including Hugh Walpole and Middleton Murry, both of them eager for fame. Although curious about the interiors of London literary life, she had qualms and reservations as well, and took refuge on weekends with her parents. In fact, their home continued to be her chief residence until her mother's death in 1925, when she had already become one of the "leading lady novelists" so sought after and so irritating to Virginia Woolf.

Rose Macaulay's family plays a large, complicated part in her personal history and her career. Her parents were cousins, her mother a devout High Anglican, her father indifferent to religion, perhaps ensuring thereby that his wife's influence would be the stronger. Of their six surviving children, only his second daughter, Rose, was at home in the scholarly world, but she also found it hard—throughout her life—to resist the lure of faith. For she stemmed from a long, distinguished line of clergymen as well as intellectuals—Macaulays, Babingtons, Conybeares, and Roses. The poet Robert Herrick was also one of her ancestors, and his century became her favorite, not least for its extraordinary mixture of poets, scholars, and divines, the secular with the sacred, libertinism with puritanism. Indeed, the conflicts at the heart of seventeenth-century life and literature seem to have been reproduced in Rose Macaulay herself and account for some of the difficulties critics have had getting her into focus. That she was not unaware of this all her work shows, for it, too, is divided between the frivolous or secular and the intensely moral; between the irreverent and the worshipful; between public display and secretiveness; between worldliness and asceticism. In *Keeping Up Appearances* (1928), these opposing sides of her are amusingly depicted in the central character, as though to make light of the theme of divided selves —and thus perhaps to confirm it as an unsolved problem. Her heroine seems at first to be a pair of sisters—one a popular, outgoing, prolific writer, the other scholarly and withdrawn—but then in an arch aside midway through the novel, she is revealed to be one person, a contemporary type of the split personality, a creature of the new Freudian psychology.

Rose Macaulay was certainly conscious of the incompatible strands in her makeup. The vein of skepticism ran as deep as the opposing vein of faith. Perhaps by marrying as cousins, her parents had exacerbated the differences rather than cemented the similarities. She confesses as much with a series of scholarly works in the Thirties that revolve compulsively around the subject of heritage. She may have felt that the reputation gained from her topical satires of the Twenties—that of a clever, freethinking, argumentative middlebrow, addicted to cerebral but transient pleasures—needed to be qualified and offset. She had created by then a narrative form peculiarly hers, a blend of the essay and the novel, presided over by the ironic and sophisticated voice that most readers took to be the author's: a voice ideally suited to the disengaged, unsettled postwar generation. In the early Thirties, however, she began to sound a very different note and turned another side to her public by producing a trio of remarkable books: *Some Religious Elements in English Literature* (1931), which is still readable; *They Were Defeated* (1932), an historical novel set in the seventeenth century; and a short life of John Milton (1934) that displeased his admirers by not allowing the greatness of the poetry to obscure the limitations of the man. She presented him as nothing less than "an arrogant, self-dedicated solitary, a superb and monstrous alien." Her controversial Milton was followed a few years later by a full-length study of E. M. Forster's novels (1938), which she saw as the product of a thoroughly homegrown English sensibility—rational, modest, humane—and which she went out of her way to praise.

Among these books, the one of most value today for what it tells us about Rose Macaulay is the historical novel, *They Were Defeated.* A genuine *tour de force,* its language



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consists mainly of words actually in use during the seventeenth century. It happens also to be autobiographical fiction of a remarkable kind: a mingling of English, family, and personal history. Set in the period just before the outbreak of the Civil War, the novel's central characters are modeled on her own ancestors—the Conybeares and Robert Herrick, the parson whose limpid love lyrics offended the minds of the Cambridge metaphysicals. Rose Macaulay slips herself into the plot of the novel in the form of the young, intellectually precocious Julian Conybeare, daughter of a bookish physician working on a history of irrationality.

Julian's name as well as her unfortunate fate provide us with a glimpse of yet another Rose Macaulay, neither the one who dominated the novels of the Twenties nor the one emerging from the scholarly works of the Thirties. This one gave to a slew of fictional girls and women masculine or genderless names—Stanley, Rome, Neville, Denham, Laurie—and had them play, beneath the surface, a revealing double role. On the one hand, they certainly represent Rose Macaulay's belligerent view that the only difference worth noting between males and females was intellectual; on the other, they serve—intentionally or not—to minimize the importance of sexuality, in effect refusing to grant it primacy. This impression is reinforced by yet another group of characters—the girls who look and dress like boys and who sometimes come to grief because they fiercely resist growing unequivocally into women. "Sexless," the world would call them, as it was to call Rose Macaulay herself for the tall, bony, casual figure she made: "a withered spindle-shanked virgin," was how Virginia Woolf once put it.

This side of Rose Macaulay few people ever fathomed, least of all Virginia Woolf, who had her own problems about sex but who also knew surprisingly little about Rose Macaulay, even though by the Thirties they were on equal as well as more intimate terms. But only Rose Macaulay's closest friends knew anything at all about the intense relationship at the center of her life, a relationship which endured for a quarter of a century and left its unmistakable mark on the patterns and themes of her fiction.

In her historical novel, Julian Conybeare —for whom sex and mind do not mix—is faced with a variant of Rose Macaulay's own dilemma, one which she wove into her fiction from the early days of her secret affair with Gerald O'Donovan, former priest, married man, father of three children, and minor novelist. They had met—and become lovers—toward the end of the First World War. He was head of the Italian section of the British Government's Propaganda Department, and Rose Macaulay—temporarily employed in the civil service, like other university women—was transferred there because of her fluency in Italian. She had learned the language as a child, when the family lived for several years in Varazze, a town on the Ligurian coast, some twenty miles west of Genoa. It was a period in their lives that the Macaulay children never forgot, associated for them with nature, sensuality, freedom. They had come to Italy for its legendary sun, to cure their mother of tuberculosis. And while her lungs were healing, there was neither school for them nor restraint of any kind. Small wonder that to the end of Rose Macaulay's life, Varazze was Paradise and Italian its language.

But it became, with the advent of Gerald O'Donovan, the language of sin and guilt as well—linked with illicit sex, which created for her a bar to the sacraments. Her long affair with O'Donovan cut her off from the church just when she had begun to take a renewed interest in religious practice. The greater her sense of sin, the more fervent her longing for a communion she felt she did not deserve. And as her writings reveal, the dilemma intensified with time, embedding in her fiction a running argument between the counterclaims of religion and sex. In novel after novel there are traces of the conflicts and contradictions in her personal life that she could not verbalize elsewhere. They constitute an autobiographical dimension that has gone virtually unremarked, mainly



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because Rose Macaulay herself was bent on concealment but also because she did not believe in tragic emotions for ordinary life. Sadness yes, frustration, of course, and certainly guilt, but not the heroics of tragedy. Thus, at the end of *They Were Defeated,* with Julian dead and everyone vanquished, the central message of endurance and moderation is contained in the "Epigraph on the Earl of Strafford," a poem whose doubtful authorship left Rose Macaulay free to imagine it as having been written by Julian and found by her lover John Cleveland, to whom the poem is usually ascribed. And she has him take its last lines to contain Julian's forgiveness of his trifling with her love: "Riddles lye heere; and in a worde/Heere lyes bloud; and let it lye/Speechless still, and never crye."

In the novel, the riddles surrounding the execution of Strafford and the ensuing civil war are neither solvable nor cause for tears, resulting as they do from the imperfection we all share, a well-worn yet powerful theme. Rose Macaulay had taken it to heart early on, and blended the appeal of the classical with the attraction of the modern. She was given to the long look and the balanced view, yet taken by the passing show. Human oddities, antiquated words, popular beliefs and customs: all these delighted her and fed her art, which, in the manner of her favorite Latin poet, Catullus, she tried to steer between the comic and the tragic, between satire and epic, even between the subjective and the impersonal. *Told by an Idiot* (1923), for example, is a mixture of genres: in its structure a chronicle novel, in its tone a mock epic, in its content a social history of England from 1879 to 1920. Full of facts and brilliant commentary, and the distinctive gaiety and skepticism with which Rose Macaulay registered the so-called progress of civilization, it also presents the warring elements in her own personality, divided among three characters—Rome, the eldest daughter and clever critic who seems to believe in nothing but has learned to conceal everything; her sister Stanley, the ardent reformer whose enthusiasms weary her aesthete-husband; and their niece Imogen, one of Rose Macaulay's boyish young girls unwilling to grow up.

The contradictory self-images have tended to cancel each other out. For the sake of consistency, nearly everyone has settled for the Rose Macaulay whose fictional voice most resembled the one so often heard in public. But to ignore the free-hand sketches of herself scattered through the novels, is, in fact, to close them off and keep her silent, prevent us from hearing what may turn out to be the most compelling lesson she was driven to work out for herself in fiction: the Blakean one of the marriage of Heaven and Hell.

This was the painful burden of a series of definitive events in the world and her personal life that found their way into her later fiction, testing her anti-romantic vision to its limits. As the Thirties wore on and the Spanish Civil War became a rallying point and a cause for liberals and intellectuals, Rose Macaulay, in their midst, was more in the news than ever. As one of the original sponsors of Canon Sheppard's Peace Pledge Union, whose members renounced war, she wrote a pamphlet, *An Open Letter to a Non-Pacifist,* that was an apologia for a position she nevertheless had trouble defending. At the same time she wrote a novel wryly called *I Would Be Private* and strenuously objected, in her daily *Spectator* column, to the acquittal of an English lord charged with causing a traffic fatality; he sued both her and the *Spectator* for libel damages, and won.

The libel suit had scarcely been forgotten when Rose Macaulay caused her own traffic accident, injuries included. It went unnoticed by the avid press because the legal name on her driver's license was Emilie Macaulay. The publicity would have been unpleasant indeed, because her passenger was Gerald O'Donovan. On holiday together in the spring of 1939 and driving in her car from the Lakes to the Roman Wall, they were involved in a serious collision. Gerald suffered head injuries and not long afterward a stroke, from which he gradually recovered. The accident was clearly Rose Macaulay's fault; unlike the arrogant lord who had denied culpability even though he had been



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driving on the wrong side of the road, she took the blame for it on the spot. But shaken by the narrow escape from several kinds of disaster, she could not help meditating on the limits of her own responsibility, and even wondering in what realm or sphere her own life was actually being carried on—with Gerald O'Donovan or with the rest of the world. And just how much did the rest of the world mean to her? The answers to these questions were already taking shape in her fiction.

*And No Man's Wit* (1940) was her second novel about a civil war—this time the contemporary Spanish one, linked to the earlier work, however, by its title from Donne. In it, she created a puzzling minor character who, far from fitting into the main plot, stands out by seeming arbitrary and contrived. The presence of this disturbing girl, who has always wanted to do nothing but swim, is usually explained away as a lighthearted fantasy, inspired by Rose Macaulay's own familiar English fondness for bathing. But the effect of the girl's character is dark and eerie, with psychoanalytic undertones. In the belief that she has finally rediscovered her natural element—the sea—Ellen Green swims farther and farther out, loses her sense of direction as well as her confidence, and drowns, without anyone knowing what has happened to her. Her "case"—for this is how Rose Macaulay presents it—comes perilously close to an enactment of her author's sense of her own secret and drifting existence between opposing worlds—Gerald O'Donovan's and God's. But it is in God's unplumbed world that she fears she may drown.

Ellen Green's fate seems to sound a note of warning which Rose Macaulay amplified in the story she wrote a year and a half later, one of her rare ventures into short fiction. Called "Miss Anstruther's Letters," and written in the early months of 1942, when London was trying to recover from the great blitz and Gerald O'Donovan was hopelessly ill with cancer, it is about a woman who returns one evening to find her home gone. Rose Macaulay herself, in a bombing attack the previous May, had had the same devastating experience. Miss Anstruther, however, is given an opportunity Rose Macaulay did not have—to remove a few possessions before the fire got too intense and no one was allowed back in. But to her dismay and shock, after retrieving a few relatively insignificant items, she realizes—too late—that she has forgotten the letters from her dead lover, all of them saved for rereading when the world was quiet again, all now lost forever in a total silence she can scarcely bear to contemplate. There is no comfort possible; and Rose Macaulay allows none, for this is precisely her point. She was looking ahead. The handwriting on the wall told her plainly that when Gerald O'Donovan died nothing would be left—not a single scrap—of the intensely physical relationship that had dominated her life for a quarter of a century. And she wondered what could fill such a void and whether the waters of faith—if she ever reached them—would sustain her.

Gerald O'Donovan died in the summer of 1942, and Rose Macaulay paid her tribute to him in the conventional form of a letter to the *Times,* signed with her initials. But in any number of novels, and known only to him, she had already testified to his overwhelming influence on her life, for good or ill. All the evidence indicates that the astonishing creativity of the Twenties and Thirties was sparked by O'Donovan. Her career seems to have meant more to him than his own, perhaps because hers held greater promise, and he urged her on, but he also encouraged a disposition to dependency that was nearly disastrous. Indeed, her greatest tribute to him would come in *The Towers of Trebizond,* when time had given her back the acerbic fictional voice he had always preferred to any other, and she could spell out in his favorite tones the nature of the bond between them.

Meanwhile she finished out the Forties—once the war had ended—in travel to foreign lands and in writing splendid books about them: *They Went to Portugal* (1946); *Fabled Shore* (1949). But novels seemed impossible until the end of the decade, when she re-



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turned to fiction, as though to pick up the emotional threads of her life, and produced *The World My Wilderness,* a novel about the postwar world that many people could not help feeling was her most pessimistic work. They were responding to the vision of the world in physical and moral ruins, to the lost child Barbary—a teenage anarchist—and the cultivated, cynical university graduate, destined, Rose Macaulay feared, to rebuild England in his own image. Yet no one seems to have noticed that she had also created for the first time a central character (Barbary's mother) openly committed to sensuality. Helen Michel dabbles in several arts and specializes in the pleasures of the body. She has never compromised either her unconventionality or her feelings, and, significantly enough, by the end of the novel hers is the most balanced and sympathetic character of all, as though Rose Macaulay had arrived at a strenuously argued conclusion about the efficacy of love and sex. In a book full of moral lapses and ironies, the magnificently amoral figure of Helen Michel becomes the linchpin. A few years later, *The Towers of Trebizond* would revolve around an adulterous affair that is also a vehicle of religious faith.

In between, in characteristic Macaulayan style, came an apparent corrective to *The World My Wilderness* (and its setting amidst London's postwar rubble) in the form of a sumptuous prose work, *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953). She spent four years researching the responses of human beings in all eras to the great ruins, and in the process found her way back to the religion of her ancestors, helped in this by a priest out of her own past. He was one of the Cowley Fathers, a religious community that held an appeal for C. S. Lewis as well as Rose Macaulay. She had met Father Hamilton Cowper Johnson before the First World War but lost track of him when he was sent to the States. Now, in 1950, he wrote to her, compelled to do so after reading her historical novel, *They Were Defeated,* thus initiating an extraordinary correspondence published after her death. These letters show how timely was the entrance of the learned Father Johnson into her life, for he replaced Gerald O'Donovan as the representative of benign, admiring authority. She depended on his answers to all her questions—theological as well as personal—and they invariably came. No one reading the irreverent and satiric novels of Rose Macaulay's middle years—*Potterism, Dangerous Ages, Mystery at Geneva, Told by an Idiot, Orphan Island, Keeping Up Appearances, Staying With Relations*—could have dreamed that the Church would one day come to serve as the cherished companion others seek and find in tangible human relationships.

She had played her worldly role only too well. Even among those who knew her, relatively few were aware of the extent to which, in her last decade, religious practice regulated her life and occupied her mind. This too, like her relationship with Gerald O'Donovan, was her own private affair. She thought people ought to "consume their own smoke." So her appearances in public were as numerous and catholic as ever, their lively character unchanged, but early each morning she might have been found worshipping at Grosvenor Chapel, the little eighteenth-century church near her flat, where the brand of Anglicanism—"high but not 'extreme'"—seemed perfect.

In this state of unworldly contentment, she wrote *The Towers of Trebizond,* one of her funniest and raciest novels: an ingeniously clever first-person narrative that is a travel guide to Turkey as well as a mystery, a fable, and a farce. It was also her most openly religious work of fiction, centering on a long-standing secret liaison, like her own, that provides a beautiful example of the way in which fiction can be so frankly autobiographical that it turns into high and impersonal art. The affair in the novel—between cousins, one of whom (Vere) is married—has been going on for years, with neither party having the slightest intention of giving it up. As Laurie (the narrator) says, there was no way out of the dilemma such love produced—the "discord in the mind, the



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happiness and the guilt and the remorse pulling in opposite ways so that the mind and soul are torn in two." Here indeed is the marriage of Heaven and Hell. And the only way out—the death of one of the lovers—becomes in fiction a mirror version of reality, reflecting Rose Macaulay's acceptance of equal responsibility in the long-term relationship with Gerald O'Donovan that had been the source, in the same measure, of joy and sorrow. This is why the lovers are made kin in *The Towers of Trebizond*; this is why the narrator's sex is not revealed until the last moment; and this is why Laurie must bring about Vere's death in an automobile accident caused by senseless pride. The novel ends here, with Laurie (female) living "in two hells," without love and without God, the hellish paradise gone forever and insensibility all that remains.

Yet the novel did not depress its readers as *The World My Wilderness* had done, for many of them heard Rose Macaulay's voice suggesting, through the young and vital Laurie, that the hopelessness would not last, as it had not lasted for Rose Macaulay herself. When she wrote the novel, she had already made her way back to the Church from her own lowest point, after Gerald O'Donovan's death. In fact, *Towers* was an instant success, winning her the James Tait Black Memorial prize in 1957 and prompting her inclusion in the 1958 New Year's Honours. Thus, not long before her sudden death in October of that year, she became—like her friend Ivy Compton-Burnett later on—Dame Commander of the British Empire.

They were a striking pair indeed, and one is tempted to remark that in spite of her celebrated presence in the great world, Rose Macaulay was as private as the opaque and secretive Compton-Burnett. In style, of course, they were utterly different, but Rose Macaulay's lucid expositions often concealed nearly as much as Ivy Compton-Burnett's oblique dialogues. Perhaps they were both incurable blends of opposites, who resist definition and exasperate critics. All her life Rose Macaulay had alternated between contrasting self-images, so that even in death the worldly and unworldly sides of her were curiously mingled. The young assistant priest who spoke at the Requiem Mass held for her at Grosvenor Chapel, where she had received so much personal solace during her last years, was himself a social and worldly being, a "new type" she had actually commented on in a letter to Father Johnson. Now he could not refrain from observing that it was hard to believe she would miss this gathering of all her friends, and he half-expected her to turn up at her own memorial service. They were words she might have put into his mouth if he had been a character in one of her irreligious novels.

Rose Macaulay's absence from today's critical consciousness is another matter, not difficult to understand, even though she offers so rewarding a mix of cultural materials for the historian of women and literature. Determinedly anti-romantic to the last, she also blended causticity and piety into a heady modern brew. When you add to this that she turned fiction into a social essay and her social life into a fiction, the end result might well be a disappearing author in the postmodern mode. Given, however, to reconstruction rather than deconstruction, I would argue that Rose Macaulay *is* available to critical scrutiny. The brilliant surfaces of her fiction—the rhetorical flourishes, the linguistic explorations, the witty play of idea against idea—yield only a partial portrait of the artist, a portrait that has held sway for years, in large measure because she wanted it that way. But beyond the verbal facility—and the clear prose persona mistaken for its elusive and polymorphous author—is a rich historical imagination that never failed her and a religious sensibility she could neither wholly suppress nor fully indulge, not even in her old age, when she was free of the personal constraints of the past. An ingrained skepticism always got in the way, so that hers was an art of contrarieties played against each other, at its best in such fictions as *The World My Wilderness* and *The Towers of Trebizond,* supremely balanced achievements that represent the hard-won triumph of classicism and impersonality.



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# Poems *by Theodore Weiss, James Ulmer, Donald Justice & Phillis Levin*

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## A Parisian air

(after Marcel Duchamp)

This long-beaked,
one-legged, bird-like
bottle keeps a kind of wine
in it, a thoughtful weeping,

of good spirits
nevertheless since aerial
beyond all sense. A man must
tote to a new country

what he can to remind
him, when dreariness sets in,
of where he's been. Open it
and, as a whiff escapes,

slowly, if a thirsty
drinking, breathe it in;
the way a burly summer
turns to light and sweet,



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neatly accurate
upon the tongue, inside
a ripened grape, the very
song it, forging, seems

inspired by.
So now, when breathing's
knife-like for the ice
within the air, drawing

big, abrasive tears,
this vial will let out
Paris, mild yet sprightly
presence bent to oversee

Luxembourgean strolls,
a feeling that drew paints
to it like greedy pigeons
as they gaped to be

so gathered, so arranged
that they were flying, they
were soaring without wings,
were uttered, utterly,

without a tongue, an air
that goes on breathing
long after its original
has turned to other things.

—*Theodore Weiss*



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# Widow-watching

In this Olson was right:
it's the syllable that matters
as it, fettering the breath in,
makes it lightsome,
roomy.
Writing about him, a younger
poet tells us, "Recently I've
been staring
at the New
York etchings of John Sloan,
'an incorrigible widow-watcher.'"
And I teeter
over widow,
like it, wish to believe in it,
but my reason adjudges it
nothing but a misprint.
Yet
that word, since his etchings
mirror many women, doing
what they had to,
may well
have hit the bull's eye. Surely
widows would have filled
a good part
of the hours
he spent at the speckled, rear-
window of his 23rd Street
studio staring



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into fusty
tenement rooms, the railroad
apartments facing on his alley,
no doubt places
suitable
for widows, life's left-overs,
and those too poor to ever
get started,
at last mattering
in his look as in the loving
stroke bit deeply, surely
into his plates.

—*Theodore Weiss*



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# For my grandfather

I'd help him weed his garden,
and once a toad jumped near my hand, the dirt
springing to life.
A hummingbird:
green thumb hovering over roses.
Then the grass sprouted white dandelion heads.

His first stroke wiped out his English.
Looking at us, his blue eyes
empty, he'd ask my mother,
*Wessen kinder*—whose children?
and we'd run out to the fields, without parents,

and chase the viceroys that flamed over goldenrod,
the whole world burning and summer
nearly done, each day
the dark closing down on us
sooner, and then the ground, suddenly one evening,

cold to our feet.
Apples softened in the grass;
his broken trellis leaned by the toolshed door.

—*James Ulmer*



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## After school practice: a short story

Rain that masks the world
Presses it back too hard against
His forehead at the pane.
Three stories down, umbrellas
Are borne along the current of the sidewalk; a bus
Glides like a giant planchette
In some mysterious pattern through the traffic.
Alone now, he feels lost in the new apartment;
There is some dark cloud shouldering in.
His wish, if he were given one,
Would be for the baby next door to awaken
And cry out, signifying end of nap.
Then he could practice. (Apartment life
Is full of these considerations.)
But when finally this does occur,
He still for a time postpones the first chord.
He looks around, full of secrets,
Carefully, with fists and elbows, preparing
One dark, tremendous chord
Never heard before—his own thunder!

And the strings will quiver with it
A long time before the held pedal
Gives up the sound completely—this throbbing
Of the piano's great exposed heart.
Then, soberly, he begins his scales.

And gradually the storm outside dies away.

*—Donald Justice*



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## Rilke's Nightfall

You asked so little: only that one day
A rose be named after you; and today,
After last night's musings, in this summer
That returns me to you—still swimming
In the wave that first pulled me to the long
Flowing script of your elegies, the whorled
Shell of your sonnets, the ebb and flow
Of knowledge and loss in the halting cadence
A body assumes as the shoreline is claimed
By the tide—today I have come up
With a name, though I haven't yet planted
The flower, and am far from finding a plot
For the garden that will nourish and sustain
The light of this new rose, Rilke's Nightfall.

*—Phillis Levin*



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Music

# Zeroing in on Karajan

*by Samuel Lipman*

There are two different approaches these days to writing about the most celebrated living musicians. The first is hagiographical, with the musical sainthood in question arising less from beauty of soul than from efficiency of press agent. Prime examples of such cultist efforts are the sentimental books about opera singers now seemingly a necessary accompaniment to an over- and misused voice. The second is spiteful; it takes its raison d'être from nothing more profound than the natural human desire to cut the famous down to size. A prime recent example of this way of writing biography was Glenn Plaskin's life of Vladimir Horowitz, in which the artist, and those around him, were blamed for his not emerging publicly as a full-fledged, lifelong homosexual.[1] This year music lovers have been presented with another example of the spiteful approach in Roger Vaughan's recent biography of Herbert von Karajan, the legendary German conductor now nearing eighty.[2]

Biographical spite doesn't exist save when it is projected onto success, and Karajan is quite simply the most successful conductor to have emerged on the international music scene since World War II. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he was perhaps the leading conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra in London; in 1955 he became the director for life of the Berlin Philharmonic; in 1957 he became the director as well of the Vienna Opera, a post he held until 1964; in 1967 he founded the Salzburg Easter Festival, and he remains to this day the Festival's leading power. Karajan has recorded more major repertory works than any other conductor of this century; he has made at least eight hundred recordings, and sold over one hundred million LPs. In this age of compact discs, his sales still lead those of his competitors.

It must be said that, in writing this biography, Roger Vaughan has found a vulnerable as well as a famous subject. One of Karajan's many unattractive features is his Nazi past: he appears to have joined the Party not just once, but twice. Another is the insouciant way in which he passes off his political behavior as simple opportunism. Yet another disreputable feature is his having married three times. (He seems to have gotten away with providing almost no details of the first two marriages, and no photographs of the women involved.) It is probably not seen to his credit either that he has made a great deal of money, which he spends on such crass objects as villas in Salzburg, St. Moritz, and St. Tropez, and on private jets and yachts, both of which he operates himself. (Roger Vaughan, by the way, is the editor of *The Yacht* magazine.) He is said, too—horrors!—to manipulate the press,

1 *Horowitz: A Biography of Vladimir Horowitz* (Morrow, 1983), by Glenn Plaskin; see my review in *The New Criterion,* March, 1983.

2 *Herbert von Karajan: A Biographical Portrait,* by Roger Vaughan. Norton, 274 pages, $16.95.



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usually finding a way to bend these guardians of the artistic weal to his own purposes.

All these unattractive features, of course, add up to a charge of arrogant, self-centered, and dictatorial behavior, a charge all the more compelling when it is made against someone who lived and prospered in the greater Germany of Hitler's twelve-year *Reich*. Yet if the reasons cited above were all that could be used to make Karajan out to be a dictator, Roger Vaughan would hardly have had enough to confect a book. For even Karajan's enemies have seen him as hardly more than a Nazi *d'occasion*, and there are times in politics when a defense based on careerism—*vide* Albert Speer—is perhaps more acceptable than one based on deluded fervor. It seems difficult, too, to be upset for very long over Karajan's marital behavior, since his first wife is long dead, he remains on reasonably close terms with his second, and his third marriage has lasted more than a quarter century. As for his extravagance, in an increasingly consumption-oriented world, it hardly seems a damning flaw.

But there is more to Mr. Vaughan's picture of Karajan as monster. In this biography, Karajan is depicted as an *artistic* dictator, a cold and distant Caesar whose tyrannical whims rule the lives of a host of lackeys and hangers-on: personal assistants, institutional administrators, managers, record producers; the head of Karajan's own film company (devoted solely to documenting the master's art for posterity), his sailing coach, his chauffeur. The list seems endless, and the devotion is uniformly dog-like —or else.

Apparently, what Karajan wants, Karajan gets. From the beginning of his book to its end, Mr. Vaughan makes plain that there is a seamless web connecting the conductor's personal wishes with his musical goals. Nowhere is this more clear than in the lengthy chapter describing the preparations for a production of Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* at the Salzburg Easter Festival in 1983.

The Easter Festival, of course, is hardly an ordinary, hastily assembled grab bag of musical targets of opportunity. As Mr. Vaughan makes clear, everything is centrally directed:

> The festival is an annual event consisting of a new opera production and three different programs of symphonic music, each of which is performed twice. In recent years, a third opera performance has been scheduled for filming. It is truly Karajan's festival. He selects the program and brings in *his* orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, for the opera and all concerts. He conducts all nine performances, which are crammed into a ten-day period . . . He also personally casts the singers for the opera and is stage director of the production. In addition, he is lighting director, supervisor of set design and properties, supervisor of costumes right down to the fabrics and colors, and in charge of special effects. "It is a wonder," Munich critic and long-time Karajan watcher Joachim Kaiser has said, "that he doesn't sell tickets and usher people to their seats."

Not only is everything centrally directed by Karajan, it is centrally planned as well:

> [An opera production] begins three years in advance, with the selection of the opera and the sketches for sets and costumes. Casting must be done early, because not only are the best singers booked well in advance, the Karajan plan requires more time than a singer would usually devote to a single production. Karajan first records the opera in the fall of the year preceding the Festival. This means pulling the cast together for a week or ten days—twenty recording sessions—usually in Vienna's Musikverein, one of Karajan's favorite places to record. Once the recording is edited and packaged, a tape of it is sent to each singer. This allows all members of the cast to listen to the opera they will be singing in the spring, sung by them and the cast they will be singing with, played by the orchestra they will be accompanied by, so that when they arrive in Salzburg for rehearsals the piece will be second-nature. When rehearsals begin, the singers can concentrate on blocking and act-



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> ing while they lip-synch to the familiar tape being played over loudspeakers in the hall. Day after day they hear their own voices, listen for weak spots, learn ways to improve their performance.

As Mr. Vaughan stresses, Karajan puts all this immense effort in the production of opera at the service of the music, not (in the fashion of so many directors, avant-garde and not so avant-garde) at the service of stage spectacle. This attitude emerges from the words of the conductor's "personal assistant stage director," Peter Busse:

> "The Maestro is clear in everything he does . . . . The visual side of the performance is totally covered by the music. That's why he has taken everything into his own hands. He can make sure he sees on stage what he sees and feels in the music. The circle is completed. That doesn't happen unless the stage director happens to be right on key with the conductor. Karajan alone has the talent, power, the means to do both."

Karajan himself is quite aware of the total nature of his conductorial demands, and he glories in them. He even glories, one suspects, in their deformation. When asked by Mr. Vaughan to describe the work and person of a conductor, Karajan replied:

> "He is like the hydra of mythology, with nine heads for so much music; twelve arms for so many musicians. He is an ambassador of music, a priest of his profession, a bringer of peace and beauty. He is adored by millions and condemned by the rest as a dictator, shamelessly making business out of art. A charlatan. Has any profession in history suffered such contradictions as that of conductor? It can only be compared with the fanaticism of sectarians."

Karajan does not shrink from the implications of such a job description, even when they come uncomfortably close to the memory of a real German dictator. As he goes on to say:

> "And there is some taint to the principle of leadership. Hitler called himself 'the leader,' *ja?* So this word has taken on a bitter aspect. It is a suspect word. When people appreciate that someone has to exert his will, they always become suspicious. Leadership—dictatorship. A strong will to express one's self is apt to be criticized today. People seem not to dare to express their opinions openly and with the force to fulfill them. But in the realm of pure art this principle has value. One man must express it, otherwise nothing great will come out."

Mr. Vaughan, too, does not resist drawing the parallel between Karajan and Hitler. With a none-too-subtle allusion to the Nazi slogan *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer,* he immediately remarks: "This philosophy—one man, one expression—is at the core of the Karajan organization as well as the artistic endeavor. The Karajan shop runs from the top down."

It must not be thought that Mr. Vaughan denies Karajan credit for what he has achieved. But throughout this book there is a prevailing tone of disapproval. Despite the human sacrifice of Karajan's willing associates, and the real courage that the conductor has shown in confronting the physical illnesses that have more than once threatened to bring his career to a halt, despite even his great musical talents, Mr. Vaughan implies that it has all been false and ugly.

Thus Mr. Vaughan draws the moral that Karajan is forgiven "all too casually" for his sadistic treatment of subordinates and colleagues. In support of this position he tells a story from the rehearsals for the *Flying Dutchman* at Salzburg, when the conductor for no evident reason turned on Günther Schneider-Siemssen, his stage designer for many years and the man responsible for designing the aborted Karajan *Ring* at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1960s:

> Karajan struck like a serpent. He looked at Schneider-Siemssen, who was expecting nothing more than the usual light, postrehearsal banter, looked at him for a moment, then said,



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> "you have brown eyes, the eyes of a traitor." Schneider-Siemssen froze. The color drained from his face. "I never noticed that before," Karajan said, half to himself, half to those within earshot. Then he chuckled, got up and left.

Mr. Vaughan is dismissive, to say the least, of Karajan's penchant for getting the most work and play out of each day. About the way Karajan arranges his getting from place to place, Mr. Vaughan speaks at first scathingly and finally with grudging sympathy:

> Traveling with Karajan is to witness an extravagant fantasy being played out. He flies by helicopter from the pasture beside his house in Anif [just outside Salzburg] to the airport in Munich, using the trip as an excuse to take a flying lesson (or vice versa?). He sets the chopper down gently beside his pointy-nosed, high-tailed jet, where the crew is waiting, and soars off to wherever he must while the rest of us spend life-sapping hours in ticket-counter lines and slumped wearily in lounges. While we wait endlessly and without hope for baggage, Karajan travels with nary a toothbrush. A complete wardrobe of jogging suits, sporty jackets, running sneakers, sweaters, and performing clothes awaits him at each of his houses. Many of the ways the rich choose to spend their money are laughable, outrageous, unappealing. But who among us much-abused, perpetually disgruntled business travelers wouldn't adopt Karajan's travel scene in a minute if we could?

Even Karajan's desire to lead an active life under conditions of precarious health Mr. Vaughan calls into question with a skeptical and perhaps cynical reference. Thus he quotes Wolfgang Stresemann, the manager of the Berlin Philharmonic from 1959 to 1978, as saying of Karajan's physical courage: "He works too hard at the sporting life . . . . [e]ither you are or you aren't."

The bottom line, of course, is the music. Here Mr. Vaughan rarely speaks in his own voice, but is content instead to quote assorted dismissive critics, including *The New Yorker*'s Andrew Porter, *The New York Times*'s Harold C. Schonberg, the London *Sunday Times*'s David Cairns, and longtime Vienna *schlock* culture expert Joseph Wechsberg. Wechsberg is lovingly remembered, at least by me, as the author of *Looking for a Bluebird* (1945), a humorously sentimental description of the life of a free-lance European café and shipboard musician.

It is hardly necessary to quote the comments of Mr. Vaughan's chosen reviewers here, for they all make the same point, and that is a simple one. Karajan's music-making is brilliant but heartless, full of marvelous details but withal humanly empty. And the comparisons to elders and presumed betters abound—Toscanini, Szell, and Furtwängler are called in to represent what real conducting is all about. They, it seems, were *human*; Herbert von Karajan is a machine, projecting a brilliant mind but no *feeling* whatsoever.

To judge from some well-placed reviews of this biography, critical opinion agrees with Mr. Vaughan's (and his experts') assessment of Karajan. Thus Michael Tanner, writing this spring in the *Times Literary Supplement* under the headline "Maestro into Monster," denies any value at all to the conductor's musical achievement as a whole:

> Much of the music allegedly closest to Karajan's heart he conducts horribly: Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, for instance. He manages to eliminate counterpoint and rhythmic vitality from Bach; Beethoven sounds "civilized" in the worst sense; and in Wagner he delivers brashness instead of the elemental, and for the intimate substitutes electronically managed hush. He excels at the higher kitsch—*Ein Heldenleben* and *Der Rosenkavalier* seem to be the works in which he can express himself most fully. He has been betrayed, by his adoration of machines and his aesthetic of beautiful sound, into the production of impossible performances, both icy and schmaltzy, and into an actual preference for records over live performances ("perfectionism").



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To listen to Karajan's performances after reading what so many critics have written about them is to go from the ridiculous to the sublime. In the case of Wagner, for example, Karajan has to his credit an absolutely extraordinary recording of *The Ring of the Nibelung,*[3] which manages the miracle of presenting that fantasy of treachery through the medium of the most refined singing and orchestral playing imaginable. It must be remembered, too, that his 1951 Bayreuth recording of *Die Meistersinger,*[4] despite its outdated sound, remains in its freshness and simplicity the standard by which all other complete recordings of the opera must be judged.

Not all Karajan's Wagner recordings are wonderful, of course. Despite its many beauties, I found Karajan's 1981 recording of *Parsifal* disappointing because of its lack of an overall, integrated conception. But no such strictures apply to his 1983 recording of *The Flying Dutchman,*[5] the Salzburg staging of which is the object of so much snide attention in Mr. Vaughan's book. In this performance, Karajan transforms our understanding of the musical weight, and therefore the artistic value, of the opera. Taking material which usually seems a somewhat more complicated version of Meyerbeer (and brilliantly using the freedom that sophisticated electronic techniques allow an imaginative conductor), Karajan places the opera and its music in the greatest tradition of German symphonism; and at the climactic moments he achieves, through cumulative effect, a thrilling power and searing beauty vouchsafed only to the greatest music in the greatest performances.

I cannot say that over the years I have been a great admirer of Karajan's Beethoven. My difficulty is not that it sounds, in Michael Tanner's phrase, "'civilized' in the worst sense," a phrase I take to be an accusation of degeneration and rottenness. On the contrary, it has seemed—as it did in 1982 at a Berlin Philharmonic performance in Pasadena of the Beethoven Fifth and Sixth symphonies[6]—to lack sympathy for Beethoven's rhetoric, and therefore to end up sounding under-committed and slightly ragged despite Karajan's great musical and technical command.

But such is not always the case with this artist's Beethoven. That Karajan is capable of penetrating Beethoven's heroic world is shown by a remarkable "pirate" recording of a live performance of *Fidelio* from Salzburg in 1957.[7] Aided by beautiful orchestral playing from the Vienna Philharmonic and a strong cast—including Christl Goltz, Sena Jurinac (a former Karajan favorite, quoted extensively by Mr. Vaughan against the conductor), Paul Schöffler, and Otto Edelmann—Karajan uses his inborn good taste and refinement (rare enough among conductors since World War II) to convey Beethoven's own atmosphere of high, indeed cosmic, seriousness.

Nor can it be said that Karajan has failed in the performance of Richard Strauss. Karajan's recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf is justly praised, and his 1954 recording of the fascinating and extravagantly tasteful *Ariadne auf Naxos*[8] remains the standard by which newer recordings are judged. Mention should be made too of Karajan's 1947 recording, with the Vienna Philharmonic, of Strauss's *Metamorphosen* (1945) for twenty-three solo strings; it is simply affecting, and simply beautiful.

The peculiarly Central European music of Mahler has always seemed rather far removed

3 Still available on Deutsche Grammophon LPs, this recording has recently appeared on Compact Discs.

4 This recording, long available here as a budget album from Seraphim, has recently been listed in the German catalogues as EMI 151-43 390/4 M.

5 EMI/Angel DSCX-3958.

6 My article on this concert, and on the Pasadena Mahler performance I discuss below, appeared in the December, 1982, issue of *The New Criterion.*

7 This performance has been available on Melodram (Italy) 40, but let the buyer beware: the recording is not complete, lacking, for example, Rocco's aria "*Hat man nicht auch Gold beineben.*"

8 Once issued here as Angel 3532 C/L, this recording is available in Europe as EMI 153-03 520/22 M.



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from Karajan's fastidious sensibility; indeed, he has tended to avoid this music throughout his career. This has led, of course, to the charge that Karajan has for extra-musical reasons ignored the music of Mahler, who was Jewish. And yet the performance of the last movement of the Mahler Ninth Symphony I heard in 1982 at the Berlin Philharmonic concerts in Pasadena will long remain in my mind—in its expression of utter hopelessness and tragic finality—as the formative experience of a lifetime.

To speak so highly of Herbert von Karajan as a conductor—to recognize that he is the greatest conductor to come to international attention since the end of World War II; that he is the only, and very likely the last, representative of the great Austro-German conducting tradition of Mahler, Strauss, Furtwängler, and Walter; and that he is unequalled in his general culture, musical knowledge, and technical command of orchestral forces—is not to canonize him as musically perfect. His performances *are* uneven, and sometimes they *are* cool and merely efficient. His musical sympathies are limited, and sadly extend to precious little music written since World War I—though when he does play this more recent music his performances are on a level of care and penetration rarely encountered today, as in the case of his recording of Hindemith's Suite from *Mathis der Maler*.[9] And even if much is made of his encouragement of new and young conductors, singers, and instrumentalists—he is widely recognized as the mentor of Seiji Ozawa, the present conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra—he seems in this area to have had the same difficulty as other musical mentors have had: the acorn, however generously cultivated, never seems to produce quite as good a tree.

But despite all that can be said artistically against Karajan, a widespread charge of musical nullity cannot be sustained. So as we evaluate this man's long career, going back

9 The Hindemith performance is on a 1960s LP, Angel 35949.



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as it does into the late 1920s, we are forced to recognize that the real gravamen of the accusations against him does not concern his music-making, but rather his personality. Again, there is evidence to be adduced against him. Surely one has to admit that Karajan is a musical and personal dictator; that he wants his own way, and has gotten it; that he is perfectly willing to bend everyone to his desires and to his iron will.

But all this merely means that Karajan behaves like a great conductor. The search for fine, gentle, caring human beings does not lead to the discovery of great musical artists. To believe that these rare creatures are easy on the people around them is to indulge in rank ignorance and sentimentality. Ignorance because those doing the indulging can have no idea of the demands of talent, courage, determination, and obsessive labor musical creation and performance on the highest level place upon those involved; ignorance also because such a simple attitude shows absolutely no sense of just how untalented, inefficient, and uncreative most of the people actually are who proclaim their mission to be in the arts and with whom great artists must perforce work. Sentimentality, because to imagine that a great artist is, or could ever be, a forgiving and divine savior is to base one's conception of man not on his flawed nature but on God's perfection. Ignorance, I suppose, is a natural right; sentimentality on this scale, in its utopian over-valuation of man, comes close—dare one say it?—to blasphemy.

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Art

# The Cones of Baltimore

*by Eric Gibson*

One conclusion we are likely to draw after visiting the major Matisse museums of the Northeast is how different an impression of the artist each of them yields. Whereas with most artists we can count on a certain predictability from museum to museum, that isn't the case with Matisse. Each institution seems to have its own idea of who—or what—he is. One of these collections, the Cone Collection at the Baltimore Museum of Art, was given a new installation this summer. The collection and the two remarkable women who formed it are the subjects of a new study entitled *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta,* by Brenda Richardson, assistant director for art at the museum, who also had charge of the re-installation.[1]

The Cone Collection is notable for including two of Matisse's most celebrated paintings, the *Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)* of 1907, and the *Large Reclining Nude* of 1935, better known as the *Pink Nude.* But it is also the only American Matisse collection formed in the heroic days of modernism that remains intact and easily accessible today. Leo and Gertrude Stein's collection, the first important private collection of modern art formed by Americans anywhere, had a surprisingly brief existence. When, in 1913, Leo moved out of the Paris apartment he shared with his sister Gertrude, he took most of their Matisses with him—a collection of nearly every important Fauve and post-Fauve painting—and immediately began to sell them. (Gertrude Stein's share, mostly pictures by Picasso and Cézanne, remained more or less intact until Alice B. Toklas's death in 1967, when it was sold. The most important Picassos wound up at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.) Similarly, brother Michael Stein and his wife Sarah began dispersing their Matisses in the early Twenties.

The Museum of Modern Art, of course, could not begin collecting Matisse until 1929, the year it was founded, and only acquired its first picture, *Interior with Violin* of 1922, two years later through the bequest of Lillie P. Bliss. In the years since, the collection has grown to become recognized as the leading repository of Matisse's art in the world, affording the most comprehensive accounting of the artist's achievement in all media. If it can be said to have a point of view, it is the view that focuses on Matisse at his most ambitious, as the artist central to the development of modern art: emerging from Pointillism into an evolving Fauvism; harnessing Fauvism's more unruly aspects in the service of a grand decorative style; confronting and coming to terms with Cubism; and moving on to become the pioneer artist of the cutouts as well as a great sculptor.

But at MOMA it is largely the Cézannist Matisse that we see, the Matisse who throughout his career turned to a more con-

1 *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta,* by Brenda Richardson; the Baltimore Museum of Art, 202 pages, $40.



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structive mode of pictorial organization to achieve a tonic rigor that color alone could not provide. Indeed, though consisting of fewer than a half dozen paintings, the group covering Matisse's involvement with Cubism takes us to the very center of Matisse's determination to confront this particular set of pictorial problems. It begins with the formal tightening of *Woman on a High Stool* of 1914, moves to Matisse's head-on battle with Cubist syntax in the 1915 *Variation on a Still Life by de Heem,* and on to his final assimilation of Cubism in *The Moroccans* of 1915 and *Piano Lesson* of 1916. Though Matisse's Cubist period is brief, it acquires a moving intensity as traced by the museum, providing one of the high points of the collection.

Another major American Matisse collector, Albert Barnes, began comparatively late. Although Barnes bought his first Matisse around 1913, he didn't really get going until the Twenties. Barnes saw Matisse primarily as a great decorative artist—"decorative" for Barnes was an exalted term—so it is no surprise that the Barnes Collection emphasizes this aspect of his artistic personality, beginning with *Joie de Vivre* and culminating in the great *Dance* mural of 1932-33. There is also a strong preference for a more spontaneous, down-to-earth Matisse. Nowhere is this distinction more evident than in the Barnes *Music Lesson* of 1917. Painted a year before the Modern's *Piano Lesson,* the Barnes picture shows the Matisse family reading, sewing, or at the piano. It is at once more immediate and more ample than the Modern's austere, architectonic painting.

The Matisse of the Cone Collection is, mainly, the Matisse of 1919-1930, the years during which he began intermittently to live and work in the South of France. This was a time when, turning away from the aesthetic battles of the preceding decade and a half, he embraced a more realistic, spontaneous style, recording the observed rather than the invented world. The Cone Collection contains many interiors with objects or women, as well as odalisques, portraits, and views through a window with nearby figures. Most of the paintings are easel-size; this was not a period of large-scale endeavors.[2]

Less ambitious than at any other time in his career, the Matisse of the Nice period offers the viewer fewer riches. In *Festival of Flowers,* for example, we look down onto a brightly decorated boulevard from a balcony shared by two women, who are themselves surrounded by flowers. It is the plentitude of color and its staccato repetition down the avenue which has pricked Matisse's interest, this and the spatial challenge of reconciling the nearby women and the abruptly receding landscape vista. Yet he seems to have less of himself invested here than in earlier versions of similar subjects, such as the numerous views from his Paris studios up and down the Quai Saint-Michel. In *Festival of Flowers,* as elsewhere in this phase of the Cone Collection, one is struck by the absence of vital tension, so common in Matisse's work, or of any bold, formal resolutions. It is as though Matisse were regathering his energies between periods of intense creative exertion.

Interestingly, Brenda Richardson makes no attempt to make more out of these paintings than logic allows. In a refreshing example of curatorial candor, she writes: "While none of these pictures are without quality . . . as a body they nonetheless represent the least challenging and somehow most complacent of [Matisse's] works. This sedate group of paintings comprises about one-third of the Cone sisters' collection of Matisse paintings and, as such, lends the collection as a whole a less progressive character than it would otherwise have." One can easily understand, conversely, the virtual absence of Nice period canvases from MOMA —it has only two paintings and some twenty prints and drawings in an inventory of over two hundred works. This is not a Matisse

2 An exhibition of Matisse's paintings from this period, entitled "Henri Matisse: The Early Years in Nice 1916-1930," will be on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington from November 2, 1986 through March 29, 1987.



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who can be said to be central to the evolution of modernism that MOMA enshrines.

The new installation of the Cone Collection does little to soften its shortcomings. This situation is not entirely Richardson's fault, since the building she had to work with posed insurmountable obstacles. The Cone Wing was designed at the time of the Cone bequest in the Fifties (Etta, the surviving sister, died in 1949) and was clearly built more to match the existing museum architecture than to provide a suitable setting for specific works of art. It is divided into three long galleries. The central one, which houses the Matisses, has the character of a barn or hangar: it is a cavernous, unbroken space. The ceilings are too high, the walls run unarticulated from one end to the other, and the gallery itself is too wide—there can be nothing casual about crossing from one long wall to the other. The grandiose space seems to make a claim for the paintings they cannot possibly live up to.

Richardson is not quite blameless, however. In hanging the pictures, she failed to play to the collection's strengths. The three most commanding paintings in the collection, the *Blue Nude, Pink Nude,* and *Interior with Dog* (1934), are each placed in a corner, and adjacent to doorways to the adjoining galleries. Not only are these paintings diminished by being relegated to the periphery, but the foot traffic in front of them makes it almost impossible to view them with any degree of concentration. Meanwhile the less powerful, smaller works are grouped according to subject on the long walls and are scarcely able to hold their own in the enormous expanse.

Nor is the sculpture treated much better. The Cone Collection presents a more representative view of Matisse the sculptor than of Matisse the painter. It includes such important works as *Madeleine I* of 1901, *Reclining Nude* of 1906-07 (the companion piece to *Blue Nude*), and *Venus in a Shell* of 1930; it also includes the unique edition of the 1930 *Tiari* with the gold necklace. Yet most of the sculpture is contained in two

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unprepossessing glass cases. The physical confinement and harsh lighting markedly reduce the plasticity of the pieces, making them appear like glistening lumps of bronze. Only the Rodinesque *Le Serf* of 1900-1903 and *Large Seated Nude* of 1923-25 have any life at all. *Large Seated Nude* is forceful in its fusion of the subject's physical ease and the implied instability of its pose—leaning back against nothing. *Le Serf* is so placed as to afford a complete view, back and front. This is in contrast to the Museum of Modern Art where, in spite of the obvious thematic link between a rear view and the four *Back* reliefs in the garden below, only *Le Serf*'s front and sides can be studied. Curiously, however, the thoughtful Baltimore display of *Le Serf* is undermined by its proximity to one of the sculpture-filled glass cases, which discourages the viewer from walking completely around it.

Limitations of architecture and installation aside, the Cone Collection does have its share of memorable pictures. Not all are as tepid as *Festival of Flowers*. Those with more body to them generally fall outside the Nice period. Richardson observes in her book that, "Above all, the Cones responded most warmly and with their most astute critical judgment to that aspect of Matisse's art that can broadly be defined as portraiture. The overriding strength of the collection is in its bold, singular images . . . ." I agree with the point but quibble with the category, preferring the term "still life" to characterize Matisse at his best in the collection. At any rate, it is with objects contemplated close-to and contained within a circumscribed pictorial environment that Matisse flourishes. In such paintings, intellectual concentration assumes the ordering role performed elsewhere by Cézannist construction or by flat, saturated color.

The *Blue* and *Pink* nudes obviously fall into this category of pictures. Painted in 1907, almost a year after Matisse's first, brief visit to Africa, the *Blue Nude* is his Polyklitan standard, his vision of the ideal ordering and disposition of the figure. But it is much more, for it reflects Matisse's emotional affinity for the primitive art he had recently started collecting. In the pose and placement of the figure, in its Fauve color and handling, and in the way it seems to writhe and press itself toward the viewer, *Blue Nude* is one of the artist's most visceral, uncompromising paintings. Even from its corner position, it causes an unsettling and lingering vibration throughout the otherwise placid collection—like a rock thrown in a pool. By comparison, the reclining figure in *Pink Nude* has been domesticated. Her considerable erotic energies are contained by the circuitous, undulating arabesque that describes her form, by the limited but expansive color areas, and by the coincidence of her image with the flat, delimiting characteristics of the support.

There are three portraits that are of special interest. *Woman in a Turban (Lorette)* of 1917, *The Yellow Dress* of 1929-31, and *Blue Eyes* of 1935 balance the relationship between formal invention and psychological penetration in different ways. Finally, there are two notable still lifes, *Yellow Pottery from Provence* of 1906, a bold Fauve work, and *The Pewter Jug* of 1917. The latter depicts a dish, fruit, and glass on a sharply tilted table top, with a pewter jug standing behind. What is particularly striking in this painting is the pitch-black void revealed by a drawn rear curtain. It is a black of such intensity that it dominates the whole picture, endowing it with an almost Spanish gravity and a psychological resonance rare in Matisse's work.

Even allowing for the Cone sisters' preference for Matisse's Nice period paintings, they were oddly cautious in their purchases of works outside the years 1919-1930. The *Blue Nude* and *Yellow Pottery from Provence* are the only Fauve Matisses in the collection. The Cones acquired none of the Steins' paintings at the time they became available, from 1913 on, only buying *Blue Nude* in 1926 from the John Quinn auction. For no clear reason, they purchased no Matisses between 1906 and 1922, and completely missed the great decorative and Moroccan canvases, such as *Harmony in Red* or the



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*Arab Café,* works that were snapped up almost before the paint was dry by the great Russian collectors Sergei Shchukin[3] and Ivan Morosov. The same year Matisse painted *The White Turban* and *The Pewter Jug* he also finished *The Moroccans* (MOMA) and *Bathers by a River* (Art Institute of Chicago), yet one finds no trace of such vanguard tendencies in the Cone Collection. Like Barnes and Shchukin, Etta Cone commissioned a work from Matisse, in 1930, but it was only a memorial drawing of her sister Claribel, not a great canvas or mural.

All this points to a paradox at the center of the collection. How could the sisters have been so close to Matisse and the Matisse market, with innumerable first-rate pictures within such easy reach, and financial resources greater than the Steins', and yet have come away with such an unadventurous selection?

The answer to this question emerges from Brenda Richardson's excellent book. Only recently have early modern collections or collectors been receiving any serious scholarly attention. The John Quinn, Katherine Dreier, and Peggy Guggenheim collections have all been admirably researched and documented in the last ten years, but scholarship in this field is still a rarity. The Modern's 1970 catalogue of the Stein collections was sadly lacking in important information concerning the dates of acquisition and sale of their works, and nothing has ever appeared on the Barnes Collection. The Phillips Collection in Washington published a Summary Catalogue last year, but as valuable as it is, it only points up how much more one would like to know about Duncan Phillips's activities that the existing literature does not tell us. Other studies of collecting and collectors, like Aline B. Saarinen's *The Proud Possessors,* tend to focus primarily on personalities. The great virtue of Richardson's book, aside from its thorough documentation of every Cone acquisition, is that she concentrates not on the eccentricities of her protagonists, or the way they spent their money—although there is much said on both subjects—but on the individual impulses which brought the collection into existence. Richardson studies the link between the personalities of the collectors and the character of the collection they formed, recognizing that art collecting is in some sense a species of autobiography, one "written" more slowly and with less self-consciousness than the literary variety, to be sure, but revealing all the same.

According to Richardson, the Cone sisters followed an agenda entirely different from that of other collectors of their time. Unlike Leo Stein and Sergei Shchukin, for example, they were not interested in Matisse as the leader of the avant-garde, or at least did not act on the basis of such an interest. Their motivations were far more parochial. They collected to decorate their apartments and, as Claribel said, because "things are soothing—if they are works of art—whereas most people are over-stimulating."[4] Hence the "unprogressive" character of the Cone Collection. The sisters wanted to be surrounded by a collection of paintings which would harmonize with their domestic environment, rather than present an independent and competing "environment" of its own.

For most collectors, decisions concerning the purchase of works of art usually occur at a movable point between two poles: the intellectual and the emotional. A collector may buy a work because he thinks he should have it, or because he likes it. What makes art collecting so interesting is that the

3 As the Cone Collection was being reopened to the public, a selection from Shchukin's Matisse Collection was on tour in the United States in the exhibition "Impressionist to Early Modern Paintings from the U.S.S.R."

4 Knowingly or not, Claribel's comment echoes the celebrated passage in Matisse's *Notes of a Painter* (1908) where he speaks of his desire for "an art which might be . . . like a mental soother, like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue."



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two elements are never entirely separate. It is a matter of emphasis.

Claribel and Etta Cone were exceptions to this rule. They dispensed with the intellectual aspect of collecting and gave themselves entirely to their subjective impulses. At least this was the case until sometime in the Twenties when they realized that their various purchases were adding up to an art collection and that it was time to start thinking of it in those terms. They then took steps to provide their Matisses with an historical context, buying works by Van Gogh, Cézanne, Renoir, Degas, Pissarro, Redon, Sisley, Rodin, and Dalou. In the interests of a broader, more considered representation, they began about the same time to buy works from phases of an artist's career they didn't care for. According to Richardson, this is how Picasso's *Study for Nude with Drapery* entered the collection, the 1907 watercolor study for the painting of the same title in Leningrad. It also partly explains the purchase of *Blue Nude,* which entered the collection at a time when the Cones were eager to secure pictures with a Stein provenance.

Yet in contrast to a collection like Duncan Phillips's—in which there is an attempt to point up the underlying affinities between works of different periods—the Cone Collection demonstrates no governing logic. Instead, paintings that the sisters purchased spontaneously, for their personal satisfaction, exist side by side with those bought mainly to give a greater aesthetic and historical weight to the collection. This explains the emotional gulf that separates *Study for Nude with Drapery* and the other Picassos in the collection (all from the Blue and Rose Periods) and the *Blue Nude* from the bulk of the Matisses.

Yet the desire for a soothing domestic environment does not itself entirely account for the collection. Quite early in her book, Richardson describes the totally unexpected flowering of Etta's interest in art collecting. A short time after her father's death in 1898, Etta asked her brother Moses for three hundred dollars for art works to decorate the family home. She returned with five paintings by the American Impressionist painter Theodore Robinson—among them, his *Mother and Child* and *The Young Violinist* from the 1880s. In one of the most telling passages in the book, Brenda Richardson writes:

> However Etta came to Robinson's work, she was in 1898 reaching out to something beyond her direct experience, to what was then the still exotic world of contemporary art. Nonetheless, by selecting the traditional subjects she did, she managed to retain an appropriate degree of propriety essential to her self-respect as a well-bred maiden of the upper classes of Jewish society. For the rest of her life Etta would be challenged in a way that Claribel apparently never was . . . by internal conflicts between propriety and eccentricity. Invariably, she selected works of art that retained traditional subject-matter even when that very traditionalism seemed to subvert the artist's formal invention. Attracted to modernism, her personal taste was narrowly circumscribed by her essentially Victorian upbringing and forever contained by her capacity to embrace anything beyond relatively realistic figures and landscape subjects.

Clearly, then, the Cone Collection was to some extent shaped by Etta's consciousness of her social position, her desire to avoid anything that would compromise her standing in the eyes of her peers in Baltimore. The Cones were buying art at a time when collecting was a very different activity from what it has since become. Although it is now characterized by the comforting security of social cachet, aesthetic consensus, and future financial gain, in the early days of the modern movement to be a collector of modern art was to be, in a sense, *engagé.* A purchase was as much a gesture in support of modern art as an idea as it was an aesthetic statement, and as such was likely to open the buyer to as much ridicule as the artist. Among the many visitors to Leo and Gertrude's apartment there were those who came to jeer. Yet in their purchases, Claribel



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and Etta preferred to remain *hors concours,* to occupy an aesthetic middle ground, evidently to avoid being seen to violate some unwritten code back home. Only in the Twenties, when their social standing as Baltimore matrons had been transformed by the growing recognition of them as important collectors, and when Matisse had become a known quantity in America, did they feel confident enough to undertake their more adventurous purchases.

One of the interesting aspects of the Cones' collecting was that it was not confined to art. Although their art collecting took place on a grand scale (fifty-seven works bought during the summer of 1922 alone), it was matched by purchases in comparable quantity of textiles, rugs, Japanese prints, costume jewelry, and the like. Richardson quotes Etta writing in a letter: "We are drowned in things." And Michael Stein wrote to his sister: "I had to go today and pack off our car full of Claribel's truck so that she will get off. Her room was full of it as usual." Much as collecting may have nourished an aesthetic side of their personalities, clearly it was part of a larger psychological support system for two women who found their security and satisfaction in the presence of things.

The friendship between the Cone sisters and Leo and Gertrude Stein forms a major part of Richardson's book. The four knew one another from around 1892, when all were entering, or were well into, their twenties. The newly orphaned Gertrude and Leo had come to live with relatives in Baltimore, who formed part of the same social circle as the Cone family. When Gertrude was a student at Johns Hopkins Medical School, she would make the trip there every day in the company of Claribel, then engaged in research at the medical school. Meanwhile, Etta grew close to Leo, and began absorbing his ideas on art and aesthetics. Richardson doesn't say as much, but given that Etta bought the Robinsons at the time of her friendship with Leo, it seems likely that it was he who was responsible

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for her newly awakened interest in art collecting.

The friendship among the four continued to flourish in the years following, with the Cones and the Steins travelling together on European trips. (It was on one such trip at the turn of the century that Etta and Gertrude are believed to have begun a brief affair.) Later, the Cone sisters saw much of Leo and Gertrude in Paris, and even more of Michael and Sarah. After Leo moved out of 27, rue de Fleurus, Etta's friendship with Gertrude continued, although not with its former intensity. By the Thirties, real and imagined slights had substantially eroded Etta and Gertrude's friendship, and by 1934 it had all but ended. The two saw nothing of each other during Gertrude's triumphant 1934 lecture tour of the United States (which included Baltimore).

But all this only touches the surface of a relationship of uncommon depth and complexity. Claribel and Etta were very definite but very different personalities. Claribel was an accomplished, confident woman, and extremely independent. (She managed to live out World War I in Germany completely unscathed, and with no thought to contact anyone back home.) Etta was the opposite—deferential and highly dependent, a person who needed the constant reassurance of an attachment to someone stronger than herself. Although separated in age from Claribel by four years, and often geographically distant, Etta had an attachment to Claribel which was an important aspect of her life. Leo and Gertrude were also extremely close. Gertrude was more like Claribel than like Etta, yet she seemed to be very dependent on Leo, with whom she maintained a household for almost a decade.

As one would expect of such personalities, the relations within each family were fraught with complications. In a passage suppressed from the final draft of *Two Women,* Gertrude's word portrait of the sisters, she observed: "Tell about . . . how they quarreled, how they spent money, . . . a little crazy, dress-making scenes." And as the separate couples came together, these relations were played out on a larger scale, and with a corresponding increase in the difficulties involved. Relations between the three women in particular became a web of tense interdependencies. Etta, of course, was in thrall to sister Claribel and to Gertrude. Gertrude for her part, despite her involvement with Etta, was noticeably drawn to Claribel, admiring her strength of character and independence. In the course of their friendship, normal distinctions between sibling, friend, and lover became hazy at best, and at times were erased altogether.

In a short time, indeed, the admiration of one or more of the others reached such a pitch as to endanger an individual's sense of self. Etta, for example, typed the original manuscript of Gertrude's *Three Lives* in 1906. Some years later, at a time when she was short of money, Gertrude invited Etta to buy the manuscript from her, which offended Etta deeply. In her mind, her role as typist had given her privileged status in the project, one far surpassing the mundane role of clerical assistant: it had escalated, it would seem, almost to that of co-author.

The Cones' pursuit of pictures of the Stein provenance was no doubt part of the same attempt to identify with their friends. The ostensible motivation may have been to round out the collection, and occasionally to offer a little financial assistance to the Steins. Yet there is something about the practice that clearly suggests the desire to take possession of more than a work of art. At the very least, the works collected by Leo and Gertrude had for both of the Cone sisters some talismanic power beyond their aesthetic appeal.

In the perspective of this fevered psychological atmosphere, the Cones' collection takes on an altogether different aspect. Far from being surprised at how unadventurous it is, one marvels that it is so tranquil, that it doesn't contain more evidence of the troubled lives of the collectors. By the end of Brenda Richardson's book we come to feel that the most interesting part of the Cone Collection is the collectors themselves.



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# Retro madness

*by Jed Perl*

Imagine the visual culture of the past four decades—everything from comic strips and psychedelic posters to Abstract Expressionist classics—gathered into one big sloppy playpen, and you have some idea of the jumble from which the young American painter Carroll Dunham pieces together his abstract paintings. Dunham can't get his scrapbook-style paintings to cohere, but he has more gut pictorial sense than most of the other artists who are wrapped up in the retro-this-and-neo-that craziness of the past few years. Dunham, who was born in 1949 and has had two one-man shows at Baskerville & Watson (the most recent was last spring), picks and chooses amidst the image bank of post-World War II America with a dandy's sense of style. Who but a dandy would paint on thin sheets of wood veneer, as Dunham invariably does? This artist is a connoisseur of materials: he likes to combine paint, powdered pigments, and lots of different graphic media. The paintings have the light, vibrant color of Fifties moderne. Dunham seems to want to get lost in his flights of fancy, and he certainly knows how to embroider a surface. As compositions, the paintings are limp—they hardly exist—and yet there's an unusual intensity to some of the bits and pieces.

If there's any single impulse dominating the art and fashion world today, it's retro madness. Retro is about remembering; it's prepackaged nostalgia. But the pose is street-smart, canny, never sentimental, and the images tend to be raucous, flashbulb bright, rather than mist-shrouded or sepia-toned. Retro, of which Dunham's paintings are a super-sophisticated, abstract version, is a game of period-style free association that both artists and gallery-goers can play. Like the neo-romanticism and academic Surrealism of the 1930s and 1940s, retro chic takes the value out of style—it presents style as an alluring, empty shell. In the Thirties and Forties, Dali, Tchelitchew, and Leonid were tapping into an interest in the mysterious, the mythic, and the magical that was also feeding the infinitely more valuable work of Masson, Balthus, and the young Abstract Expressionists. Nowadays the retro crowd's attempts to charge up art with echoes of Thirties and Fifties and Sixties pop styles connect with the desire most of the best younger artists have to bounce their own sensibilities off the visions of earlier artists. What seems beguiling to so many people in the new retro style—and what wreaks chaos on our attempts to disentangle the stuff—is the multi-textured hash that painters and sculptors are making of the recent past. These artists don't seem to have an attitude toward their sources—but they definitely have *attitude*. They're wallowing in the junk shop of postwar style the way the people who made the recent movie musical *Absolute Beginners* were wallowing in a mix of 1950s and 1960s urban youth styles. And as in that movie, in the work of an artist like Carroll Dunham you feel enormous energy being



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expended helter-skelter and to too little ultimate effect.

What immediately catches you in Carroll Dunham's paintings are the surfaces of wood veneer. The veneer—which is both natural (it comes from trees) and artificial (the stuff of fine furniture, such as the Danish modern of our youth)—sets the stage for Dunham's ironic style. Most of the paintings (they range from four to seven feet high, and are usually vertical) are made up of a few rectangular sheets of veneer. These are often of different woods and thus have different colors and grains. (The wood lends to the paintings a warm, tawny hue.) Dunham likes to set a piece of veneer with a dark, whorly look against a piece with a pale, looser grain, and in some paintings the differently toned veneers create a big pattern of rectangles to which everything else in the painting is compared. Most of the best incidents in Dunham's paintings involve his playing around with the grain in the veneer. He likes the organic flow of the patterns, which he picks out in pencil or paint, turning the natural into the artificial. (He uses paint on veneer the way actors use makeup on their faces; he's also, whether consciously or unconsciously, exploring the mystery of style in nature—the mystery, for example, of how a plant can look "medieval" or "art nouveau.") Dunham will outline a group of roughly circular forms in pencil; or he'll use a section of grain as if it were a paint-by-number game, and fill the whorls in with super-artificial day-glo tones of purple and orange and yellow. Dunham looks in the veneer for the kind of rough-edged Surrealist forms we see in Kurt Seligmann's paintings, and for the melting, Jugendstil shapes of 1960s acid-dream posters. There's an amusing tension that builds in these semi-automatist encounters.

Dunham's wood-grain meditations are flat, surfacey, anti-illusionistic. But some of the other elements he doodles on the veneer—such as passages of scribbly drawing in pencil or pen, or opaque, cartoony, phallus- and cloud-forms—jump around, and give the paintings a more ambiguous, 3-D quality. One never feels sure why Dunham has put a particular event in a particular place; the thinly painted or lightly scratched forms and the more opaquely treated ones could come from different gallaxies. This isn't a case of sloppiness. Dunham's paintings are worked on over a long period of time (he probably regards each painting as a notebook page to be returned to when the spirit moves him) and they carry, often right in the middle of the space, an inscription such as "Dec 1984-May 1985." In one painting he'll have, in addition to the wood-grain routines, some chicken scratchings that recall Cy Twombly; a big, dark-toned penis-shape; some globs of bright, smudged color; a fragment of Matta-like architecture in black ink; and a little hurricane of brilliant colored O's that fall through the painting like a confetti shower at a TV sit-com wedding. If the incidents seem unrelated, it's probably because they aren't related in any conscious way. To the limited extent the events do hang together, the glue is in the sensibility, in the taste for variety, for keeping oneself amused.

Dunham's paintings keep bringing the work of Cy Twombly to mind. If you think Twombly is a master, then you may think Dunham is a little master or a developing master. But I'm underwhelmed by Twombly's scrabbly form of elegance—it just looks like bad drawing to me—and as a draftsman Dunham seems, like Twombly, overly impressed with every squiggle produced by his hand. (The washy drawings that Dunham exhibited both at Baskerville & Watson and Jeffrey Hoffeld and Company last spring are maddeningly uncomposed.) When Dunham offers doodling as draftsmanship, one doesn't get the sense he can do it any other way. His studied informality—in drawing, in composition—doesn't seem to have developed in reaction to anything. His compositions flout every law of unity and coherence, yet they aren't acts of rebellion. These are paintings you take in slowly; but their tongue-in-cheek effects don't build. They're ambience paintings—and you stick with them only so long



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as you're willing to linger in the everything's-a-game milieu. Dunham takes the past too seriously as style and not seriously enough as art. When he invokes Matta or Twombly or Hofmann it's not so much as painters but as art-world icons—as symbols of a new, East-Village-style pop nostalgia. By now modern art is so thoroughly assimilated in the mass-culture image bank that many younger artists think it's just another side of retro pop.

I've been emphasizing the lightness of retro style, but there's also a dark, ominous, almost pathological side to the retro craze. Ultimately we're discouraged—and turned off—by artists who frame their every feeling in terms of some outmoded style. One could say of Carroll Dunham's paintings, as the movie critic Pauline Kael said of the French director Jean-Jacques Beineix's second movie, *The Moon in the Gutter,* "his material is so far removed from actual experience (and is so familiar) that it can't support the weight of his emotions." (In tone Dunham's paintings are halfway between the blue-tinted, punk-in-Paris dreaminess of Beineix's first movie, *Diva,* and the dissociated, overbearing stylization of his second.) Retro style is enjoyable enough when one encounters it on the street—in clothes, in advertisements, in "home furnishings"—but when it gets into the galleries and museums, the retro giggle has a way of turning into a grimace. As a high-art style, retro has a stale, slightly sordid flavor. It's rather a surprise that Americans—who tend to like their art fresh—should have taken to retro. (Maybe the old American taste for Gothic creepiness—as in Ivan Albright—is coming to the fore again.) But it's certainly no surprise that some of retro's most typical high-art products, such as the paintings of Sigmar Polke, originate in the Old World. Polke, the German whose name we were hearing flashed across the Atlantic from this summer's Venice Biennale, has a yeasty, desiccated view of the pop past that seems perfectly attuned to the I've-seen-it-all-before spirit of the day. Over the summer the Modern had a painting of his hanging in their contemporary gallery. *Mao* (which dated from 1972 and was acquired by MOMA four years ago) offers a portrait of the Chairman and some tacky Chinese figures painted on a surface collaged out of several different cotton fabrics. It's as dumb as any Andy Warhol. It's an Andy Warhol that's been beaten black and blue and dumped in the East River to rot for a couple of years. Pop becomes Retro Pop.

The obsession with the styles of a decade or a generation or two ago that floods through Polke's paintings—and through Dunham's, too—has a pedantic and also a slightly silly aspect. Polke—who was born in 1941 and began painting in the 1960s—comes to his Pop Art consciousness at something like first-hand; by now he's a world-weary old master of the genre. What one wonders about a younger artist like Carroll Dunham (whose work has a likable brightness) is whether his taste has drawn him to the styles of the not-too-distant past, or if he's simply nostalgic about the idea of taste—any taste. When Dunham does an Abstract Expressionist routine, I wonder if he's trying to recapture *their* energy, or just fantasizing about the funky Fifties on Tenth Street. Retro chic is a very mixed-up business. At some level, painting has to feel authentic, and Dunham's saving grace may be that he knows this instinctively. Even as his nose for style is carrying him into the connoisseurship of artificiality, his painter's eye is bringing out a bit of the pure visual poetry of a walk down Kitsch Memory Lane. Possibly an abstract painter, because he can't use the crutch of immediately legible figurative reference, has more of a shot at *transforming* retro chic into something that can stand on its own.

Still, there's a fundamental connection between what Dunham is doing and the work of artists like Sigmar Polke and the Americans Robert Longo and David Salle (who included Dunham in a show he organized at the Donald Young Gallery in Chicago last May). Like the others, Dunham is basically a collagist, connecting autonomous elements to achieve a cool, layered



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effect. I wouldn't want to glorify the contemporary collage mode, because I think it's in large measure just a gambit. Whether they know it nor not, David Salle (whose recent copies of Géricault's severed heads are bad painting without the quotation marks) and Robert Longo (whose new "Steel Angels" series ought to be dumped in the same trash bin where MTV seems to be headed) traffic in incoherence because it passes more easily than their other option, which is failed coherence. But with Dunham, whose incidents have a real flavor, it's discouraging that the pieces are so insistently unconnected. Dunham may be doing exactly what he wants to do. To make a painting that cohered he'd have to reduce the number of variegated incidents he sticks together in one piece—and this is probably something he's unwilling to attempt, since the atmosphere would immediately become less flighty. What I'd call a more coherent painting might well strike Dunham as a safer painting. He may not know how to achieve closure, but he also may not want to know.

What takes the place of closure in Dunham—as in Polke, Salle, and Longo—is a kind of anti-painting, guerrilla state of mind. Half the time, Dunham is building something we take in with our eyes; the other half of the time, he's ripping it to shreds by the way he treats each part as a detachable gesture, a statement about some aspect of the past. The self-consciousness of the process—the overload of different materials—pushes us away. There's something corrosive about the ironist's stance which says everything is a gesture and the buck never ever stops. Dunham's unwillingness to let the pieces go together leaves us feeling out of sorts; he seems at war with himself. He's unwilling to believe in a painting as a world with its own internal logic. There's no spaciousness to his vision because he won't work out the relations between the parts. What he ends up with is a spacey painting, a work in which the pieces yank around, ricocheting off one another without any rhyme or reason. However long Dunham may work on his paintings, they look unedited, unrevised. Dunham lets his ego show overly much. He loves to tell us what a knowing, retro-conscious New Yorker he is. You leave Carroll Dunham's shows with too strong an impression of the artist, and not enough of an impression of the art.



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# The storm and all: a new look at Montale

*by William Jay Smith*

*La bufera e altro (The Storm and Other Things),* which appeared in 1956, was the third book that Eugenio Montale published and it affirmed his position as the leading poet of postwar Italy and perhaps the finest since Leopardi. Montale considered the work, the product of seventeen years, the peak of his career, the first expression of his authentic voice. The purpose of the poetry in this volume, in William Arrowsmith's words, is "sympathetic magic, the accomplishment of an impossible miracle—poetry that can keep pace with, even contain, life itself . . . . these are love-poems, both personal and cosmological, without doubt the most remarkable sustained sequence of love-poems in Italian since Petrarch." Now on the thirtieth anniversary of its appearance, it is fitting that we have a major new translation of a book which in the eyes of many won for Eugenio Montale the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975.[1]

*La bufera* is indeed a treasure, but its secrets are not easily unlocked. In their study *Eugenio Montale,* subtitled *The Private Language of Poetry* (1977), Guido Almansi and Bruce Merry have summed up the problem: "[It] . . . is one of the hardest and most unmanageable books in modern literature. Time and time again even the most devoted reader, well familiar with the intractable texts, is defeated by the arbitrariness of the image, the constant shift from dream to reality, the jump from one place or time to another, the privacy of the dialogue which goes far beyond the acceptable shorthand of intimacy. *Bufera* is a book of overwhelming beauty which is still kind and harsh towards the unfortunate reader."

The difficulty begins with the title itself: *La bufera e altro.* In Italian *bufera* is a high wind, a whirlwind, bringing heavy rain; the word, sometimes used figuratively to describe the effects of passion, carries something of the poetic connotation of "tempest" in English. In Canto V of the *Inferno* it is a *bufera infernale* (a "hellish storm") that drives along the carnal sinners. Although *The Whirlwind* might better convey the vortex of the war that is central to the book, it is probably best to stay simply with *The Storm.* Arrowsmith is correct in pointing out that *altro* does not specifically mean "other poems" and that it can mean "other things." "Given Montale's relish for overtones that enlarge his poetry," *altro* in this instance, he declares, probably means "more" or "something *else.*" He thinks that it would be an intrusion on Montale's desire for open suggestiveness to define what this "something else" might be. It is "intended to alert the reader to something *there,* on the fringes as it were, something not contained within the context of the agonizing personal and cosmic war conveyed by *la bufera.*" It suggests

1 *The Storm and Other Things,* by Eugenio Montale. Translated, with preface and commentary, by William Arrowsmith. W.W. Norton & Company, 219 pages, $14.95.



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"even that ineradicable craving for 'something else' (*ti allo*) that Socrates in the *Phaedrus* attributes to Eros and the restless human longing to recover its lost or nearly forgotten origins among the gods." When he so clearly understands all the implications of the word, why Arrowsmith chooses to render it as "other things" is a mystery since these words not only destroy any notion of transcendence but also render the entire title trivial. His purpose would have been better served by simply calling the book, as others have done, *The Storm and Other Poems.*

The storm in the title poem refers to the war, World War II and the period of fascism that Montale lived through, but it refers also to "the cosmic war, the perpetual war." Montale does not present broad panoramas of the war. He sees things, events, landscapes, people through the wrong end of the telescope, where, captured in a mute, unchanging presence—in an eternal moment—they become even more alive (*provo a figgerli là come in un tondo/di cannocchiale arrovesciato, muti/e immoti, ma più vivi*). Under his narrowing gaze the most disparate objects are placed side by side and the temporal and the spiritual change and merge one into the other. Here, even more than in his earlier work, Montale avoids the grand gesture, the rhetorical flourish. His tone is always conversational, and some of the most hermetic passages are phrased as they might be in ordinary conversation. His omnipresent irony is itself a reductive force. The effect is of a cosmos compressed but alive and burning. Energy flashes and sparkles throughout. Montale is a minimal, marginal poet, but his poetry is everywhere radiant and resonant. There is a constant interplay of images, sharp and hard-edged, and associative leaps that are at first difficult to grasp. A feminine presence—Clizia, Iris, the Vixen—moves in and out of these sequences of images as muse, goddess, or visiting angel. Although rarely described in earthly terms, the woman seems always rooted in this world and yet capable of unearthly communication and heavenly intervention.

Throughout, Montale engages a poetic tradition that is minutely woven into the fabric of his imagery. An expert classicist, Arrowsmith is a brilliant guide through the texts that are echoed in these poems—Plato, the Bible, Dante and his contemporaries, and Petrarch. During his years of translating and revising, he has striven to register what he calls the requirement of "iridescence."

> Too impressionistic perhaps and too vague as a practical criterion, but for me it is the only word that does justice to the range of Montale's poetic vision. I stress "vision." The poet *sees,* not a vision perhaps, but visionary "signs," the residue or phenomenal shimmering of the lost or absent presence of the beloved; he sees these signs with an erotic intensity that is manifestly religious. The beloved who most dominates the book is the (Ovidian) Clizia, who is also called Iride—Iris, the iridescence of the rainbow, the flower, the iris of the eye . . . . More than half the poems in the book, and certainly the best, are saturated, drenched, with her presence. She is elusive, uncontainable, constantly receding from the poet's grasp, yet always present to his imagination, the sign of a covenant, a rainbow linking earth to heaven; she is simultaneously redeemer and Muse. Her gift is the poet's imaginative voice; and it is this voice, this poetry, that in "Little Testament" he calls an *iride,* the only legacy he can leave her in return . . . it is important to remember that these love-poems exist in the agonizingly real world of the Second World War and its aftermath, and that this setting is crucial to the poet's purpose. Not only because the beloved is a redemptive reality in a world which to Montale looked like a modern replica of Dante's Hell, but because the desperate political and historical situation affects the psyche's ability to adapt, to become, to maintain existential balance. A transcendental love is enough to unsettle any man; but in a world terribly out of balance and tilting, as Montale believed, toward imminent apocalypse and the collapse of civilization, the contradictions are even harder to live.



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The woman who more than any other helped the poet maintain his own existential balance is, of course, his wife Drusilla Tanzi, who was known as "Mosca" (the Fly), to whom after her death he wrote some of his greatest love poems. In *The Storm* there is only one poem indisputably addressed to her, *"Ballata scritta in una clinica"* ("Ballad Written in a Clinic"). Fearing that she is dying, here he mentions the "lenses of tears" (*lenti di lacrime*) that gather in the hollows of her eyes, lenses that are thicker even than the heavy tortoise-shell glasses that he takes from her each night. He refers to these glasses again in a very moving passage after she has died. In *Xenia* he speaks of the people who knew her as "only a myopic creature lost/in the babble of high society" (*un insetto miope/smarrito nel blabla dell'alta società*) whereas in reality she could see people even in the dark and could startle them with her bat's radar (*radar di pipistrello*). In another place he calls hers the only true eyes.

I met Montale and Mosca in Florence in the early Fifties when a number of these poems were being written. A strange couple they seemed then, he a stocky little man, earthbound, and yet with his eyes fixed off in space or else on some inner vision, while she, his mirror image, as he calls her, with her thick glasses looked for all the world like one of those insects drawn by Grandeville. With her heavy lenses and her sharp tongue, she appeared to precede him, almost with antennae, to lead him about, giving him a sense of reality and providing him a way of coping with the everyday world. His own sharpness and his own vision he retained to record in his poems.

Over the years the translation of Montale into English has met with little success. It is almost impossible to pin down in our basically heavier language his whirling clumps of energy, his knotted and pitted surface, without at the same time destroying the grain of thought and feeling. Most versions in English seem blunt and stunted, and in the only volume of his collected poems yet published there are awkward passages and errors on virtually every page. With his classical background, Arrowsmith seems the ideal interpreter. His devotion to the poet is total and the years of study that he has given to these poems make his battery of notes useful and singularly impressive.

His translation comes to us with the highest recommendations. Anthony Hecht says that it is the best version he knows, one that "has enormous muscular energy, and conveys great power and authority." Harold Bloom calls Arrowsmith "an authentically *poetic* translator surpassed by none of our contemporaries." W. S. Merwin, in awarding the book the Landon Prize, called it "a peak among poetry translations in recent years." Since I have such high regard for Arrowsmith's work in general, I especially regret that I must disagree with these assessments: not only is this translation flawed, frequently incorrect and clumsy, it is, as English, almost wholly unreadable.

What is one to make of lines like these that encumber almost every page:

> in the dead season's dungeon caves
> among the gardens stepping from Maiano
> down to these sandbanks here.
>
> *nelle cave segrete della stagione morta,*
> *negli orti che da Maiano scavalcano a questi renai.*

or:

> who struggles upstream hugging the bottom,
> under the flood of the downward torrent,
>
> *che resale in profondo, sotto la piena avversa,*

or these, where the final words degenerate into total nonsense:

> no gurgling horror
> was in it, in you light still found
> light, today no longer, now that at day-
> break, it's already almost night.
>
> *e ivi non era*
> *l'orror che fiotta, in te la luce ancora*



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*trovava luce, oggi non più che al giorno*
*primo già annotta.*

What lover ever addressed his love with words like these:

Don't let your hand brush back
the bang of hair that veils
your cherub brow.

*La frangia dei capelli che ti vela*
*la fronte puerile, tu distrarla*
*con la mano non devi.*

Phrases like the "bang of hair," of which there are unfortunately many, completely upset the direct, colloquial tone of the original.

Sometimes the word the translator chooses is only slightly off, as when a tree is "not resigned to being shadow, or trunk" (*a restar ombra, o tronco*), where the word should be "shade," or where the red on a trout's body (*balenio di carbonchio*) becomes "carbuncle blaze" rather than "ruby dazzle," but all such slips are enough to throw the poem off balance. There are errors of idiom, of emphasis, omissions that destroy the original image, as when *le architetture di marzapane degli arricchiti* becomes "the scattered marzipan architectures of the rich" rather than "the newly rich." There are lines in which a mistranslation of a verb and its object totally alters the image:

bony faces, pointed muzzles,
which the great magnolia shelters at its foot
when the gusting hurls them there.

*i volti ossuti, i musi aguzzi*
*e li protegge in fondo la magnolia*
*se un soffio ve la getta.*

—where the final line should be rendered: "if a gust of wind bends it that way." It is the magnolia tree and not the faces or muzzles that are being hurled or bent. One could forgive such blunders, which are of the sort that every translator makes, were they not so frequent and did not occur at times at the heart of important poems. In *"Ballata scritta in una clinica"* ("Ballad Written in a Clinic"), where the poet keeps a vigil beside his sick wife, he had added in the original title the words *per scaramanzie,* indicating that he intended the poem as a kind of spell against the possibility of her death. At the heart of the poem come lines which Arrowsmith translates thus:

I wait for a sign, if it's time
for the last ecstasy.

*Attendo un cenno, se è prossima*
*l'ora del ratto finale.*

and which I believe should read:

I await a sign to tell me
if the hour of final abduction
has come.

The word *ratto* can mean "religious ecstasy" as well as "abduction" but here where the poet fears that his wife is to be swept off at any moment and where, like the wooden bulldog at her bedside table, he feels incapable of stopping the act, the meaning is clearly the latter. The poem concludes—

and the howl
of the wooden dog is mine, and dumb.

*e poi l'ululo*
*del cane di legno è il mio, muto.*

—lines which I would render: "and now mine is the howl—/the mute howl—of the wooden dog."

Montale began as a singer; and although he avoids the simple lyric utterance, his poems, for all their dissonance, are never without resonance. And it is precisely this resonance which is lost in this translation. Rather than the iridescence the translator seeks, he presents a gray, colorless surface that serves only to obfuscate even further whatever obfuscation the poems originally contained. In his preface, Arrowsmith tells his reader to dispense with his notes if he



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wishes, but the fact is that the translation cannot stand without the notes: the poems, as English verse, cannot exist on their own. What in essence William Arrowsmith has given us is a critical study of *The Storm,* and the insights that it contains are always valuable and in some cases even startling in their brilliance; his English versions, if they serve to annotate this study, may be acceptable. But to stand alone as an indication of what Montale might have written had he written in English, they are, by any standard, inadequate.

# A critic's obligations

*Anthony Hecht* Obbligati: Essays in Criticism. Atheneum, 326 pages, $13.95

*reviewed by Bruce Bawer*

"My title," explains the distinguished Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Anthony Hecht in the preface to his first volume of prose, *Obbligati: Essays in Criticism,* "refers to a complex set of obligations undertaken by these essays—obligations to the works and poets they deal with, as well as to the editors, teachers, and administrators who offered me their pages and podia. I also mean to affirm what I conceive to be the proper role of criticism as a musical obbligato: that is, a counterpart that must constantly strive to move in strict harmony with and intellectual counterpoint to its subject, and remain always subordinate to the text upon which it presumes to comment."

At first blush, this sounds admirable, impressive. "Ah," we are likely to think, "what a marvelously apt and elegant title." But wait a minute. The Italian-English dictionary informs us that the Italian word for "obligations" is not *obbligati* but *obblighi* or *obbligazioni.* (*Obbligato,* to be sure, means "obliged" or "indebted," but to use the plural would seem to indicate that not only Hecht but at least one other person, as well, is obliged to those poets, editors, et al.) And the more one thinks about the notion of criticism as an obbligato, the less sense it makes. What does it mean, after all, for criticism to "move in strict harmony" with its subject, and to "remain always subordinate to the text"? Does it mean that adversarial criticism is out? What about theoretical criticism, criticism that touches on several texts in succession, or on none? Does "Tradition and the Individual Talent" fit the bill? Mightn't it be argued that much of the best and most original criticism has moved to its own harmonies? Or is Hecht merely saying that critics should not fall victim to post-structuralist conceits, that criticism, like every other literary form, should be coherent and responsible? One thing, at least, is clear: though Hecht seems to regard the notion of criticism-as-obbligato as a wonderfully modest characterization of the critic's role, quite the contrary is in fact the case; for an obbligato, though subordinate to the main theme, is a vital, indispensable part of a musical composition—and to suggest that criticism properly bears such a relationship to its subject text is audacious indeed.

If I have gone on at length about Hecht's title, the reason is that, although this is not an outlandishly bad or foolish book of criticism, it has a number of significant flaws, most of which are adumbrated by its title (or by his explanation for it). For one thing, Hecht often strains so desperately to attain the level of solemnity and grandeur suggested by his book's title that he ends up sounding pompous and pretentious (such phrases as "cinematic film" and "the vast alterity . . . of the world" fill his pages), not to mention dreary and humorless. Sometimes, as in the following sentence from "On W. H. Auden's 'In Praise of Limestone,'" he is just plain clumsy, solemnly mixing metaphors and grandly contorting syntax:

> Since the landscape reflects by its dissolution (mark that, if you please) in water a kind of fickleness, or a physical frailty in "us" (which is to say, we are homesick for it because it is like us: it dissolves as we become dissolute), might



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> it not therefore seem a constant form of reproach, or, at the very least, a constant reminder of our mortality, and therefore a place to be fled?

And at times his diction goes awry. He writes in one essay, for example, that in the third line of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" T. S. Eliot "presents a skyscape that shall serve as the presiding fate and destiny of the chief characters who inhabit beneath its crepuscular dimness"; in another essay, he says of social Darwinism that "We have been inured by its terrible forces into taking it for granted."

Hecht aims throughout the book, moreover, to depict himself as a *molto obbligato* critic kneeling *con umilità* before the *tempio di litteratura.* Toward the end of an essay on *The Merchant of Venice* he says: "I beg leave to offer one personal comment by way of conclusion. I hope not to be taxed with supposing that I have done justice to the play, that I have said everything that needs saying, that I have even attempted completeness . . . . My purpose throughout has merely been to discover and to display such design as integrates and unifies the play . . . ." In "Shades of Keats and Marvell" he writes: "I do not for one moment suppose that this brief commentary has exhausted the poem. I have intended only to outline what I take to be its main design and theme, and I hope one day to be able to correct a little bit the haste and crudeness of this account." And he opens an essay on Emily Dickinson as follows: "Let me begin by acknowledging how provisional and circumspect my commentary on Emily Dickinson's poetry is going to be. I present no better credentials than those of a poet who delights in poetry . . . ." Later in the essay he conjectures that Dickinson read William Blake—but he doesn't conjecture it any old way, he conjectures it "shyly."

Yet, on those occasions when Hecht really has ideas to proffer, he is anything but shyly circumspect about them. For instance, though all evidence points to Dickinson's having borrowed her characteristic verse forms from the lyrics of Protestant hymns, he says of one of these forms, "I prefer to think that Emily Dickinson might have come upon it in an anthology of religious poetry"—specifically, in Christopher Smart's "A Song to David." No evidence offered: just "I prefer to think"! Indeed, whenever Hecht starts to boast of his shy circumspection, it's a good bet that an undersupported critical judgment is not far behind.

Four of the ten essays in *Obbligati*—"Robert Lowell," "The Pathetic Fallacy," "Othello," and "Houses as Metaphors: The Poetry of Architecture"—were originally lectures, delivered at the Library of Congress, Georgetown University, and the Folger Shakespeare Library; and, as lectures, they were doubtless more than adequate. But a good lecture does not necessarily make a good essay; and, oddly, even those essays of Hecht's which were *not* originally lectures read like lectures. (They were, in fact, published—the earliest way back in 1962—in *The Hudson Review, New England Review, Times Literary Supplement,* and even *TV Guide.*) To evaluate these pieces as essays in literary criticism is to recognize that most of them meander too much, are inexcusably wordy, have little to say, and contain altogether too many long quotations which it must have been nice to hear Hecht read aloud but which are (in many instances) only partially or marginally relevant to the points he wishes to make; at least a couple of the essays read like strings of Great Quotations, chosen primarily for their intrinsic literary merit, which Hecht has attempted to connect as smoothly as possible.

Indeed, in the typical *Obbligati* essay, Hecht doesn't construct an argument so much as he conducts a leisurely, high-toned, and rather impressionistic guided tour. This does not mean that he lacks opinions about his subjects; it only means that he generally prefers, for whatever reason, not to engage in systematic argumentation. In "The Pathetic Fallacy," for instance, he spends the first several pages leading us through some passages from Ruskin, "while permitting myself an obbligato of comment." In these passages, Ruskin seeks to distinguish be-



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tween the greatest poets—those who exhibit powerful passions, powerfully governed—and those lesser poets of great passion who, morbidly refusing to govern their feelings, are unable to see the world around them as it really is, and consequently weaken their poetry by attributing emotions to inanimate objects. Hecht's "obbligato of commentary" here consists mostly of paraphrases, brief explications, and sardonic references to Ruskin's lack of logical consistency. After this journey through Ruskin, Hecht presents passages from Shakespeare, Hardy, Milton, the Bible, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, Frost, and Wilbur in which he claims to find instances of the pathetic fallacy. For example, he quotes the first sentence of *The Return of the Native*—"A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment"—and argues that the verb *embrowned* indicates "that the landscape is purposively engaged in its own transmutations." He then suggests that Eliot, by comparing the evening sky in "Prufrock" to "a patient etherised upon a table," is attributing emotions and motives to the sky. Hecht's implication is that an acceptance of Ruskin's attitude toward the pathetic fallacy would require us to condemn both of these passages—as well as those by Shakespeare, Milton, et al. It seems clear that Hecht is here deliberately broadening the meaning of the term *pathetic fallacy*—making it virtually synonymous with *personification* and *metaphor*—in order to cause Ruskin's condemnation of it to look ridiculous. Certainly a solid argument against Ruskin's position on the pathetic fallacy would not be the most difficult thing in the world to construct; but it is a construction job that Hecht, for one reason or another, has chosen not to take on. He is patently satisfied with presenting a number of famous quotations (most of them far longer than the Hardy and Eliot) and leaving it to them to carry the weight of his argument.

His essay on W. H. Auden's poem, "In Praise of Limestone," works much the same



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way. Though Hecht tosses off a few brief and superficial critical observations (about, for example, the poem's combination of "religious concern" and "worldly sensuality"), the essay is essentially a collection of quotations, each accompanied by an "obbligato of commentary." Among these quotations are a page and a half from Montesquieu on the differences in sensibility that result from climate; a page-long passage from the Gospel According to Luke; the entire text (occupying two and a half pages) of another Auden poem, "A Letter to Lord Byron"; a page of fragments from Auden's poem "Lullaby"; a page and a half on the Garden of Eden from Auden's book *The Dyer's Hand* (including Auden's description of his own personal Eden—a *jeu d'esprit* which Hecht takes seriously and sees as consistent with the "decor" of "In Praise of Limestone"); and a description (occupying two-thirds of a page) of the Baroque from Vincent Scully's book *Modern Architecture.* At last, when one expects Hecht to tie all these quotations together, he informs us that he is herewith concluding and launches blithely into yet another Auden poem, "Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno," which he quotes in full, at three pages' length. The poem does shed some light on "In Praise of Limestone"—as do some of the other passages he quotes—but exactly what sort of light it sheds is left to the reader to figure out. Which, of course, raises the question of why Anthony Hecht bothered to write the essay in the first place; perhaps it should have been titled "Materials toward the Exegesis of 'In Praise of Limestone.'"

The centerpiece of *Obbligati* is the previously unpublished eighty-page essay (ninety, including footnotes) "*The Merchant of Venice:* A Venture in Hermeneutics"—a sprawling, ambitious grab bag of useful insights, dubious analyses, and long quotations from *The History of the Jewish People,* Ezra Pound's *Cantos,* and the Bible. Hecht seeks to answer several questions about Shakespeare's play: Why is Antonio the title character, and why is he so sad at the opening? Why does Shylock want a pound of his flesh? Why is Portia such a legal whiz, and why did her late father insist that the man she marry be able to pass a test involving three caskets? Why are people so confused about what the play's tone should be? Rather than pose each of these questions in turn, Hecht answers them along the way (more or less) while he meanders through an elaborate interpretation based largely upon the play's biblical allusions. Hecht's theory, in a nutshell, is that the play's principal concern is to contrast the harshness of Old Law Jews with the gentleness and mercy of New Law Christians. In order to defend this view of the play, Hecht must explain why certain Christians in it (the Duke of Venice, Antonio, Bassanio) are far from models of virtue, and why the Jew Shylock is at times quite sympathetic. Hecht does not do this very successfully. Nor is his argument that Shakespeare wishes us to identify Shylock with the Devil at all tenable. (Hecht maintains, apropos of this matter, that the "identification of the Jew with the devil . . . has scriptural provenance," and in support cites some verses from the Gospel According to John, wherein Judas Iscariot is referred to as a "devil" into whom "Satan entered." Hecht's unconvincing gloss on this passage: "Judas Iscariot, therefore, becomes possessed by Satan, and thus betrays Jesus. In doing so he becomes the representative figure, in Christian eyes, for all Jews, who, in rejecting Christ and Christian doctrine, are in effect betraying the Messiah who came for their express salvation, and consigning him to sacrificial death." (And therefore, according to the Bible, the Jew equals Satan? Come, now!) Hecht's reasoning is shaky, too, when he argues that Shylock wants a pound of Antonio's flesh because he desires an innocent Christian's blood for use in a ritual sacrifice; this astonishing thesis is supported not by quotations from the play—which would, of course, support no such thing—but by gratuitous documentation, at several pages' length, of the well-known fact that many medieval Christians did indeed believe Jews to engage in such activities.



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Religion is a preoccupation not only in Hecht's magnum opus on *The Merchant of Venice* but in his essay on *Othello,* wherein he concludes that the play's central theme is the conflict in Othello's soul between the "Venetian-Christian-Roman" and the "barbarian-pagan" sensibilities. Now, religion is certainly a fundamental issue in both of these plays; but Shakespeare is too great a playwright to have seen things as schematically as Hecht would have us believe. Indeed, Hecht is so eager to make Shakespeare thematically tidy (Shylock equals Jewish evil, Antonio equals Christian virtue), and is so fervently on the lookout for biblical parallels, that he robs the Bard of much of his accomplishment—for certainly one of the things that make Shylock a great dramatic character is his moral ambiguity. That we continue, after all these centuries, to wonder how we are meant to "read" him indicates only that Shakespeare has created in him a compellingly and believably complex human being.

Hecht's treatment of Emily Dickinson is particularly disheartening. After referring superciliously to the multitude of absurd biographical readings of her poetry that have been published, he spends two pages or so carrying on about how "criticism owes to her work a special gallantry and diffidence," about how terrible it is that so many critics have engaged in "frivolous and irresponsible" speculation regarding the reasons for her "strange retirement" from the world, and about how our guesses along these lines should be "discreet and without presumption." "I take that caveat as addressed first of all to myself," he adds, "since I have chosen to broach this delicate and insoluble topic."

Hecht then proceeds to discuss Dickinson's life in no more or less detail than the average Dickinson critic, and (though he solemnly proclaims her "greatness") to disparage her characteristic style in a positively stunning manner. He bluntly dismisses some famous lines from "The Moon was but a Chin of Gold" ("Her Bonnet is the Firmament—/ The Universe— Her Shoe—/ The Stars—the Trinkets at her Belt—/ Her Dimities—of Blue—"), grumbling sardonically that the lines "succeed in translating the whole heavens, which were once said to declare the glory of God, into the cute dimensions of a doll"; he remarks that the entire poem "Bee! I'm expecting you!" is flawed by "coyness and girlishness"; and, though he admires the last stanza and a half of "A Bird came down the Walk," complains that the first three and a half stanzas "are written in what might be described as the cool and somewhat arch language of an idle and cold-blooded child." While it should be said that his discussion of Dickinson as a maker of riddles (if hardly original) is of interest, most of his criticisms of her poetry seem to me the work of a man who, though capable of admiring the occasional Dickinson poem, is essentially immune to the charm and splendor of her unique vision—a vision of which witty, down-to-earth metaphors for cosmic entities are a principal component.

As for Hecht's other essays, "Houses as Metaphors: The Poetry of Architecture" is a harmless collection of elegantly strung-together passages from the Bible, Ovid, Sidney, Milton, Lovelace, Marvell, Drayton, Carew, and Pope in praise of houses—in particular, great country houses. (The essay is, for the most part, an exercise in anglophilia of the sort that produced the *Brideshead Revisited* cult.) The short, reverent reviews of Richard Wilbur's *The Mind-Reader* and Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*, both written for the *TLS*, are generally fine, as is the somewhat longer essay on Robert Lowell. Yet *Obbligati* is, on the whole, a substantial disappointment. At a time when major American publishers tend to consider essay collections unmarketable (as they did short-story collections a decade ago) and consequently issue very few of them, one cannot help finding it ironic that Atheneum should publish so critically flawed a volume by a man celebrated not for his prose but for his poetry. It seems, in some way, a shirking of obligations.



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# Poetry as disease and therapy

*Bruce Bawer* The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell. Archon Books, 216 pages, $25

*reviewed by James Atlas*

The Middle Generation of Bruce Bawer's title, poised between T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and an unruly crowd of Surrealists, Beats, New York School poets, and others born in the years after World War I, has long since passed beyond the temporal rank ascribed to it. A decade after the death of its youngest member, Robert Lowell, the four poets mainly responsible for the vigor of American poetry in the postwar era belong to literary history. Their lives and works enjoy a posthumous currency. Three of them—Schwartz, Berryman, and Lowell—have been the subject of biographies; William Pritchard is at work on a life of Jarrell. Letters and journals have been collected and published; Lowell's essays will be out this spring. Studies by the late David Kalstone, John Thompson, and other hands are scheduled for publication or are in progress. "The stockmarket of literary success can be as unpredictable as Wall Street," William Barrett remarked in *The Truants,* his elegiac memoir of life among the New York intellectuals. If the quantity of secondary literature spawned by these poets is any indication, the Middle Generation is enjoying a considerable boom.

It's not only their work, of course, that has prompted such intense scrutiny. Bawer, in keeping with the general modesty of his enterprise, prefers the less flamboyant rubric, but the Middle Generation has also been called—with ample reason—the Tragic Generation. None of the poets under consideration here lived out his natural span. Jarrell and Berryman were suicides; Schwartz died, half-insane and alone, in a midtown Manhattan hotel; Lowell, who survived the longest, was dead at sixty, worn out by the long history of nervous breakdowns chronicled in his work. There was something terrifying about the way they burned themselves out; for them, poetry was a deadly business.

Disaster on such a dramatic scale threatens to overshadow its cause. "For everyone who cares to read the poems Schwartz wrote when he possessed his devils, there seem to be a thousand who delight to read about the years when his devils possessed him," Murray Kempton noted in a recent issue of *Grand Street.* As Schwartz's biographer, I don't find this phenomenon as annoying as Kempton does, but it's heartening all the same to read a book about these martyred poets in which the poetry predominates. For all the flamboyant tragedy their lives contained, the poets of the Middle Generation merit our attention because of what they wrote; whether we read it or not, it was poetry that made them what they were.

What established them as a generation? It was more than an accident of birth. "Really we had the same life," Lowell claimed in one of his late poems—a life not merely devoted to poetry, but to the conviction that nothing else mattered. To be a poet meant to apprentice oneself to a secular priesthood, to validate one's being in the world: I write, therefore I am. No poetry, not even Wordsworth's *Prelude* or Whitman's *Song of Myself,* has ever been more self-referential. The divorces, alcoholism, breakdowns, and public displays of madness recounted in their work were essential to their creativity; they were a "mutual affliction," in Bawer's view, symptoms of a common malady: "The very conditions which so tragically crippled them as men also provided their poetry with its greatest beauty and strength." For the poets of the Middle Generation, poetry was both the disease and the therapy.

Bawer's account of these conditions is skillfully managed. Without resorting to schematic arguments or twisting evidence to support a particular theory, he marshals familiar testimony to show how the four poets shared certain early experiences that shaped their development: uprooted fami-



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lies, divorced or unhappily married parents, weak fathers, overbearing mothers. The parallels are startling. Berryman's father suffered devastating financial reversals, was divorced by the poet's mother, and committed suicide. Schwartz's father abandoned his family when Delmore was a child and died young, having lost a considerable fortune in the Depression. Jarrell's parents separated when he was a boy, and his father became a distant, shadowy figure in his life. Lowell's father, described so unsparingly in *Life Studies* as the ineffectual Commander Lowell, "cheerful and cowed/among the sea-dogs at the Sunday yacht club," was a hapless failure, prone to foolish financial speculations and dominated by a bullying wife. "Estrangement, insecurity, resentment, guilt"—thus reads Bawer's litany of youthful crisis. "Out of the stress of abandonment grew the sense of an unpardonable loss, the crippling absence seeming like an ineffable injustice; then arose the hate, and, in each of them, the illogical, disabling guilt that only a child's pain can produce."

The danger of putting such analysis in the service of literary criticism is that it leaves us more or less where we started; it explains but doesn't explain. Some of Bawer's hypotheses are so general they could apply to nearly anyone. "In his childhood," he offers, "lay the seeds of Schwartz's adult personality and, more to the point, the seeds of much of his mature poetry." Well, yes, but of what poet would that not be true? And when he suggests that the memory of a violent quarrel between his parents Schwartz witnessed in childhood "may help to explain the insomnia that plagued him during his adult years," Bawer is skating on thin ice. What kept Schwartz awake was the larger trauma of his parents' marriage and his betrayed ambitions, combined with amphetamine addiction—not one isolated, highly conjectural episode in his youth.

Still, Bawer is no doctrinaire Freudian; his character analyses are shrewdly intuitive and sympathetic. I found his explanation for why the poets of the Middle Generation were so obsessed with Eliot especially persuasive. Eliot was "the ideal paternal image," Bawer argues, a remote and dictatorial figure whose impersonality encouraged a kind of literary transference: he became the father they never had. With his bowler, furled umbrella, and ready knowledge of the whole of Western culture, Eliot was the quintessential European. Out of nowhere, he had fashioned an identity that reconciled two admirable but opposing impulses: revolt and authority. He had rejected philistine America, abandoning a homeland that insufficiently appreciated literature, and in the process had made himself a member of the establishment, sitting behind his desk at Faber & Faber uttering somber pronouncements about religion and society. Clearly this was the way to go about a literary career.

The poets who gravitated toward Eliot and considered themselves his disciples had a less certain grasp of European languages and literature than their mentor. Jarrell's interest in German culture has always struck me as willed, and Lowell's "imitations" of Leopardi, Baudelaire, and other European poets are more excuses for poetry than versions of the originals. Schwartz never even got to Europe, and could scarcely read French; his translation of Rimbaud was a disaster. Berryman, notes Bawer, "tried to make a Briton out of himself." He studied at Cambridge, steeped himself in the English poets, sported a donnish bow tie. But Europe wasn't quite real to them; it represented an idea, an ideal of tradition, order, civility, high culture, art—everything America was not.

Eliot sanctified poetry, insisted upon its importance in the world. It was this faith, and the gravity with which he articulated it, that made him so attractive to Lowell and his compatriots. "Poetry," writes Bawer, "was the Middle Generation's reply to life and death." Their journals, their letters, their conversations were poetry-haunted, poetry-obsessed. Reading over Lowell's famous poem to Schwartz in *Life Studies,* I was struck again by how unflaggingly *literary* it is. Surrounded by the tools of their trade—books, a typing table, a portrait of



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Coleridge—the two poets swap allusions as they "kill" (Lowell's eerily prescient verb) a quart of gin and the Charles River turns silver in the dawn. Life ebbs away in the pursuit of a means to capture its evanescence.

Dealing as he does with four poets, Bawer must shepherd them briskly through the chronology of their careers, establishing a uniformity that belies the untidiness of life. Not all of them owed the same fealty to Eliot, nor did they suddenly break away from his influence like a pack of hunting dogs off on a new scent. Lowell was never as devoted to Eliot as were the others, and Schwartz never got over his obsession; among his papers at Yale is the manuscript of a book on Eliot that he labored over for decades and never managed to complete. Yet Bawer persists in dividing their discipleship into parallel stages: early, middle, late.

For a time, it's true, the poets of the Middle Generation were engaged in a common effort to shed their "Eliotic impersonality" in favor of a more intimate, confiding voice. But is it fair to say that the work of the late Fifties and after constitutes in every case "a clear break" from the reticence of their apprenticeship? Schwartz, for one, retreated from the strong personal idiom he developed in *Genesis,* his long autobiographical poem, to a more indistinct, self-conscious style. Bawer takes issue with critics (myself among them) who have found the later poetry diffuse; perhaps a reader who comes to Schwartz's work fresh, without having tracked him wearily through the ravages of his decline, is in a better position to respond to its music. But whatever the virtues of these sprawling, mellifluous poems, the "break" they represent is of a very different order from the stunning revelations of *Life Studies* and *Dream Songs.* By this time in his life, poetry had become for Schwartz a mask, a means of evasion; for Lowell and Berryman, it had become a powerful instrument of self-scrutiny.

Bawer is an impressive textual critic. His close readings reveal, line by line, the extraordinary dependence of the Middle Generation on Auden and Yeats. His critical voice is casual and self-assured, scholarly without being pedantic. He avoids solemnity toward grim subjects: *The Waste Land* is "the great anthology poem"; *Song of Myself,* "the poem to beat." It's a pity that Bawer feels compelled to quote so much from other critics; he doesn't need them to make his points. And I wish he had shared his bibliographical research; his quotations from original sources—Schwartz's papers in the Beinecke Library at Yale, Lowell's correspondence in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library—are mysteriously scarce. Since he went to the trouble to consult the archives, why not let the reader in on his discoveries?

Bawer's study of literary influence and the poets of the Middle Generation is the most complete we have, but it was more than shared influences that made them a generation. The intensity of their friendships, manifest in their correspondence, in the reviews they wrote of each others' work, in the accounts we have of them together, and above all in their elegies, reflects a deeper affinity. Like Shelley and Byron, Rimbaud and Verlaine, they created among themselves a climate of dangerous stimulation; their competitiveness inspired them to greater heights even as it fed the flame of their self-immolating tendencies. "In a way," writes Bawer, "the only religion any of them had was one another." Faith can damage as well as sustain.



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Notebook

# Courtship in Congreve

*by Louis Auchincloss*

Congreve through the generations has found himself constantly spanked for his morals, or lack thereof, from contemporary parsons who denounced him from the pulpit, to Thackeray, that king of Victorians masquerading as an eighteenth-century wit, who could not help wondering if the great dramatist, whose art seemed to justify a seat on the very peak of Parnassus, would not bring disapproving sniffs to the noses of the properer gods already there.

We can laugh at this in our own liberated day, but have you read him recently? He does go rather far. Making full allowance for the latitude of comedy, or even of farce, his heroes and villains still strut with astounding arrogance around a sleazy barnyard. Consider two of the former: Bellimour in *The Old Bachelor* and Mirabell in *The Way of the World*. Both are viewed as sympathetically by their creator as he seems capable of viewing men. They have charm and wit, and they are very much in love with equally charming and witty girls. Yet Bellimour, while wooing his Belinda, is quite as intently plotting the seduction of Mrs. Fondlewife, the spouse of an old fool whose name is proof, in a Congreve world, that the gods themselves will smile on his cuckolding. Mirabell is more constant to his enchanting Millament, yet he is represented, before the action of the play, as having deliberately hoodwinked the villain Fainall into marrying his discarded mistress, whom he believes—erroneously, as it turns out—to be pregnant by himself. Here is how he justifies this conduct to his old love who, understandably enough, finds herself wretched in her new union:

> If the familiarities of our loves had produced that consequence of which you were apprehensive, where could you have fixed a father's name with credit, but on a husband? I knew Fainall to be a man lavish of his morals, an interested and professing friend, a false and designing lover; yet one whose wit and outward fair behaviour have gained a reputation with the town enough to make that woman stand excused who has suffered herself to be won by his addresses. A better man ought not to have been sacrificed to the occasion; a worse had not answered to the purpose.

What the standards of the barnyard seem to boil down to is that Fainall is fair game to be cheated because he is a creep, and that Mirabell is justified in cheating him because he has charm. And as for Bellimour, is a healthy young man to give up sex while he is obliged to go through the lengthy ritual of courtship? Of course not. Such virtue is expected only of the impotent.

I suggest that Congreve is not entirely joking when he tells us through the mouths of his female characters that men are inconstant creatures who will marry their inamoratas only if the latter stick it out. The game of courtship has perfectly definite rules. For the man it is to huff and to puff, to breathe



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deathless passion which neither he nor the woman addressed believes, and to do everything in his power to seduce her—as he is simultaneously seducing others. The woman's game is to hold him off with enticing mockery and yield not so much as a kiss until she has led him firmly to the altar. The penalties in the game are all for the woman; she who yields prematurely is labeled a "whore" by all, including her conqueror, nor can she ever thereafter hope to marry a gentleman unless she resorts to the subterfuge suggested by Mirabell. Yet the word "whore," at least as used in *The Old Bachelor* to describe the unfortunate Silvia, is without any sharp pejorative sense. She has been caught offside and been penalized, so to speak, a fatal number of yards. She has lost the game, to be sure; she is now a whore. But there are plenty of nice whores. One doesn't whip them at the cart tail. Silvia in the end is even allowed to marry a minor and ridiculous character.

What has probably most shocked people through the ages about Congreve is that he seems really to have accepted this concept as a valid social system. We have recently learned in a biography of Velásquez that even the greatest artist may care more for fashion than anything else in life. To Congreve it was bad to be a cuckold, no matter how little one cared for one's wife. Why? Society decreed it. And it was bad to lose one's maidenhead before marriage, although perfectly acceptable to commit adultery afterward. Why? Society ordained it. Today he would violate *our* fashion, because it is still fashionable to believe in enduring love after marriage, however rare it may be becoming.

Or *did* he believe in it? Is that the one note of sentiment that leaks through? He never, like Oscar Wilde, tries to reconcile his cynical characters in the last act to the wedded bliss of the late Victorian illusion. But he seems to allow us to speculate that Mirabell and Millament may have a happy life together. Or is his ghost laughing up his sleeve at me? Who knows? All that I can be sure of is that he had a passionate faith in the power of language. Only Shakespeare himself had a cadence in his prose like Congreve's. Mirabell can mock like Hamlet. Hear him tell how he tried to get the good will of Millament's absurd old aunt: "I did as much as man could, with any reasonable conscience; I proceeded to the very last act of flattery with her, and was guilty of a song in her commendation. Nay, I got a friend to put her into a lampoon, and compliment her with the imputation of an affair with a young fellow, which I carried so far, that I told her the malicious town took notice that she was grown fat of a sudden; and when she lay in of a dropsy, persuaded her she was reported to be in labour. The devil's in't, if an old woman is to be flattered further, unless a man should endeavour downright personally to debauch her: and that my virtue forbade me."



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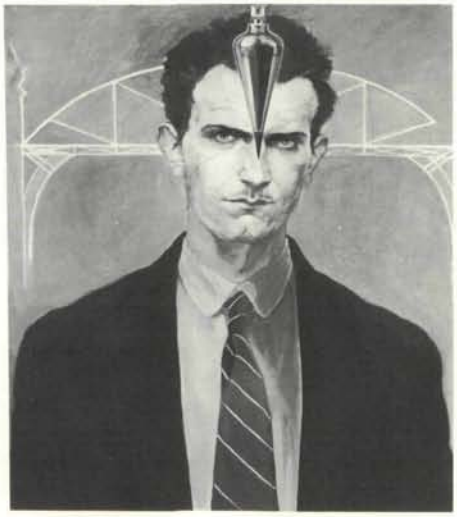

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